

# **Co-Chairs' summary report of the first meeting of the Working Group on Strengthening WHO Preparedness and Response to Health Emergencies (15–16 July 2021)**

## **SUMMARY OF DECISIONS AND NEXT STEPS**

1. Proposed dates for three further meetings were presented and agreed to:
  - 1–3 September 2021
  - 4–6 October 2021
  - 1–3 November 2021
2. Following the first meeting of the Working Group on Strengthening WHO Preparedness and Response to Health Emergencies (WGPR), the Co-Chairs will share three documents with Member States for review. Upon receipt, Member States will have a week to review and comment on:
  - the updated terms of reference in regard to the method of work of the Working Group, including the WGPR's agreement that traditional observers, UNAIDS, Unitaid and WTO, as well as other relevant key stakeholders, will be invited to future meetings as appropriate;
  - the proposed timeline and deliverables for the Working Group; and
  - the high-level proposal for a Secretariat-developed paper to organize recommendations around different options for implementation (namely what recommendation can be implemented with what existing tools and which ones may need a new tool/instrument).
3. The Secretariat will bring to the attention of the WHO regional committees a request of the WGPR Co-Chairs and the respective Vice-Chair of the relevant region, to brief the Regional Committee on the progress of the WGPR, and to provide an opportunity for an exchange of views.
4. The Secretariat noted that credentials will be required for each meeting of the WGPR.

## SUMMARY OF DISCUSSION

5. The first meeting of the Working Group took place virtually from 15 to 16 July 2021. As its first order of business, the WGPR elected the officers of the Bureau and its co-chairs:

- Co-Chairs:
  - H.E. Ms Grata Endah WERDANINGTYAS of Indonesia
  - Mr Colin MCIFF of the United States of America
- Vice-Chairs
  - Dr Malebogo KEBABONYE of Botswana
  - H.E. Mr François RIVASSEAU of France
  - Dr Ala ALWAN of Iraq
  - Dr Lyn JAMES of Singapore

6. The agenda was adopted after a substantive debate on how to order initial discussions on the WGPR's two deliverables. The Co-Chairs indicated that the two issues deserve equal time and attention and observed that it might be useful to approach the topics in an interrelated and integrated manner to achieve the WGPR's objective. Both Co-Chairs explained that at this first meeting, the approach taken by the Bureau was to invite presentations on both items 3 and 4 as scene setters and as background to inform members of the WGPR about the "tools in the toolbox" to address the issues before the WGPR. The Co-Chairs also emphasized the Bureau's interest in hearing from members of the Working Group about how work can be organized for future meetings.

7. Regarding possible working methods (documents A/WGPR/1/2 and A/WGPR/1/2 Add.1), delegations commented on several notable issues, including:

- The importance of working in efficient, effective, inclusive, consensus-based and transparent ways to ensure the meaningful engagement of Member States given the critical nature of the WGPR's focus to support efforts to strengthen WHO preparedness and response to health emergencies.
- The importance of a clear set of working methods and/or terms of reference for the WGPR.
- The possibility of exploring the use of subgroups during intersessional periods to further work or deepen discussions on key topics. A number of Member States noted that resources are limited for many, in part because of the ongoing response to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic as well as the burden of diverse portfolios, especially for smaller Geneva-based delegations, and would only support a very limited number of subgroups. Several Member States advised that no more than two be considered, if any, and that any subgroup work be organized in a sequential manner to enable maximum participation by Member States.

- Stakeholder involvement and engagement was discussed and included the areas in which further information from the Bureau on the modalities around stakeholder engagement is needed.
- Member States noted the importance of considering the ongoing work of the Working Group on Sustainable Financing but the modalities for this type of coordination needed additional consideration by the Bureau.
- The issue of meeting timing for the entire process was raised given the inequity in virtual meeting start and end times across delegations, depending on time zone. While respecting the Geneva-based nature of the WGPR, given the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Co-Chairs indicated that meeting planning would be as equitable as possible. Other processes, such as written consultation, could also be explored.

8. WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus opened the second day of the meeting. He commented on the urgent need for fundamental changes in the global health architecture, especially addressing the shortfalls in the response to the COVID-19 pandemic and preparing for the next health emergency and/or global pandemic. He recognized the importance of the task in front of the Working Group, and called on all Member States to participate fully in this process and draw on their experiences confronting the pandemic and other health emergencies. Finally, he shared his view that this is not the time for small changes and temporary solutions, but rather the moment for bold leadership and action and following through on commitments since future generations depend on us.

9. The meeting then turned to the first of two presentations by the Secretariat. The WHO Office of the Legal Counsel presented potential legal instruments and the legal basis, scope and approval process for the three tools available under the WHO Constitution as well as tools adopted outside of WHO's mandate. The Legal Office highlighted three considerations among many for the attention of the WGPR: features that are specific to legally-binding instruments (for example, ratification/accession, reservations, deposit); advantages and disadvantages of hard law/soft law and the possibility of combining legally-binding and non-legally binding elements within the same instrument; and elaboration of the instrument over time.

10. The Assistant Director-General for Emergency Preparedness and International Health Regulations presented considerations on the findings and recommendations of various review panels/committees. The Secretariat described its approach to compiling recommendations from various sources regarding the management of and response to the COVID-19 pandemic to: (1) identify critical gaps in global preparedness and response to a pandemic; (2) review similarities and differences between recommendations; and (3) consider proposals to strengthen WHO preparedness and response to health emergencies. Thus far, the process has identified 209 recommendations that have been mapped across three categories: (1) leadership and governance (local, national, regional or global); (2) systems and tools (such as the Access to COVID-19 Tools (ACT) Accelerator and COVAX, the vaccines pillar of the ACT-Accelerator); and (3) financing (for example, funding for WHO). The Secretariat highlighted that the analysis will be made available shortly to Member States via a user-friendly, online dashboard. The presentation prompted several interventions from the Member States and key questions/comments included the following.

- More information was requested concerning how Member State recommendations are being considered as well as those of past recommendations (including following the Ebola virus disease crisis, on the international health workforce, the contingency fund) vis-à-vis the recommendations currently being analysed by the Secretariat. In this vein, questions were raised about how contradictions/complementarity in recommendations are being captured.

- Further work on how recommendations are categorized will be important in the context of this Working Group's scope.
- It was noted that many recommendations mention cooperation and international solidarity and the importance of working with other international organizations besides WHO. In this regard, further clarification about which recommendations may fall outside of the mandate of WHO was requested.
- Some delegations suggested to include, for each recommendation in the database, what would be required for implementation (for example, what tools could be used, what impacts need to happen on the ground, what gaps would need to be filled, if a new international instrument would be needed or if current tools could be used, at what level implementation may occur including globally, regionally or nationally, as well as the questions on the time frame of its implementation).

11. The meeting concluded with the Co-Chairs expressing their gratitude to all Member States for their active participation and the resulting substantive discussions. The Co-Chairs expressed appreciation for the strong support offered and collaborative spirit expressed by delegations for the success of the Working Group.

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