

Heads of WTO, WHO cite importance of open trade in ensuring flow of vital medical supplies

WTO Director-General Roberto Azevêdo and World Health Organization Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus issued a joint statement on 20 April underlining their support for efforts to ensure the normal cross-border flow of vital medical supplies and other goods and services. "Protecting lives is our top priority, and these efforts can be impeded by unnecessary disruptions to global trade and supply chains," they declared. The joint statement is below.

Joint statement by WTO Director-General Roberto Azevêdo and WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus

COVID-19 has rapidly progressed to become a global pandemic, causing unprecedented, far-reaching impact on the health, social and economic well-being of communities around the world. The World Health Organization (WHO) and World Trade Organization (WTO) are committed to responding effectively to the situation, working together with other international organizations and our respective memberships. Global, coordinated action is required to deal with the extraordinary challenges the pandemic poses to people's health as well as their livelihoods.

Protecting lives is our top priority, and these efforts can be impeded by unnecessary disruptions to global trade and supply chains. Governments' trade policy decisions significantly influence both getting medical equipment and supplies to where they are urgently needed and catalyzing the supply of critical inputs for the production of medicines and health technologies to fight the pandemic. Keeping trade in health technologies as open and predictable as possible is therefore of vital interest. This will help countries to respond to this crisis, to recover from it and to build the health systems that will foster greater resilience in the future.

WHO and WTO are working together to support efforts to ensure the normal cross-border flow of vital medical supplies and other goods and services, promoting them where possible, and to resolve unnecessary disruptions to global supply chains, in furtherance of the International Health Regulations (2005) and WTO rules.

The purpose of the International Health Regulations is to prevent, protect against, control and provide a public health response to the international spread of disease in ways that are commensurate with public health risks, with a view to minimizing interference with international traffic and trade. WTO rules provide governments with the flexibilities they may need to address essential medical supply shortages and/or public health challenges. But any measure taken to promote public health that restricts trade should be "targeted, proportionate, transparent and temporary", consistent with recent calls from world leaders. Governments need to avoid measures that can disrupt supply chains and negatively impact the poorest and most vulnerable, notably in developing and least developed countries that are typically reliant on imports of medicines and medical equipment.

We call on our Members to continue to share information about their measures with WHO and WTO, in line with the established transparency mechanisms, which are now especially valuable in supporting a coordinated response. To ensure that health technologies, including diagnostics, medicines, vaccines and other medical supplies vital to treating patients infected by COVID-19, reach those in need quickly, we emphasize the importance of streamlining conformity checks based on regulatory cooperation and international standards.

While we are heartened by the remarkable research efforts and the rapid mobilization of public and private resources to develop COVID-19 health technologies, we call upon governments to implement policy measures that can further facilitate their research and development, and to promote their rapid dissemination within countries and across borders so as to ensure equitable access to those technologies. Such initiatives include targeted investment, ensuring open access to clinical test results, the sharing of relevant intellectual property rights, increasing manufacturing capacity, open and transparent procurement regimes, the elimination of tariffs on relevant health technologies, and trade facilitation measures to reduce costs and delays.

Global action, solidarity and international cooperation are more necessary than ever to address this health situation. WHO and the WTO are working together to play their part.

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