

# COVID-19 RESPONSE MEASURES: RECOMMENDATIONS TO G20 HEALTH AND FINANCE MINISTERS ON THE PROTECTION OF HEALTH WORKERS, ACCESS TO DIAGNOSTICS, THERAPEUTICS OR VACCINES AND TO SUPPORT DEBT CANCELLATION AND FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE

Amnesty International is calling on the G20 Health and Finance Ministers to demonstrate global leadership by adopting bold plans at their meeting on 17 September 2020 to protect health workers, ensure that everyone is able to access all necessary diagnostics, therapeutics or vaccines and support the poorest states to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, including through debt cancellation. The G20 Action Plan must be updated accordingly.

## PROTECTING HEALTH AND ESSENTIAL WORKERS

Health and essential workers are playing an extraordinary role in the response to COVID-19, often putting their lives, health and well-being at risk. Amnesty International has found that over 7,000 health workers have died worldwide – a figure that is likely to be a significant underestimate.<sup>1</sup> Emerging data also shows that ethnic minorities have often been disproportionately affected,<sup>2</sup> while certain professions such as community health workers and those working in nursing homes are often less visible and protected.

Health workers in many countries face unsafe conditions, including difficulties accessing personal protective equipment (PPE); they also experience challenges around remuneration and compensation, high workloads and associated anxiety and stress. In several countries, health and essential workers are facing reprisals from the state and from their employers for speaking out about their working conditions or for criticising the authorities' response.<sup>3</sup> As the pandemic continues, spreads into new areas of the world, there is an urgent need for G20 states to prioritise and cooperate to protect the workers who are risking their lives to protect us.

## RIGHT TO HEALTH AND ACCESS TO DIAGNOSTICS, THERAPEUTICS AND VACCINES

Access to diagnostics, treatments and vaccines is an indispensable part of the right to health which all states have the obligation to uphold. Governments are responsible for ensuring that any COVID-19 vaccine or treatment is available and accessible without discrimination, putting in place special measures to support specific groups at greater risk in the face of the virus, or whose marginalized position means they could be left behind in terms of access to vaccines or treatments. It is vital that G20 member states take concrete steps to ensure fair allocation within and between countries of diagnostics, therapeutics and vaccines, bearing in mind that any vaccine must be treated as a common public good to be guided by the public interest, including by increasing availability and affordability via transparency and sharing of innovations.

States also have an obligation to ensure that businesses do not infringe on the right to health, and do not obstruct access to COVID-19 treatments and vaccines. The right to health also obliges states to use their maximum available resources to ensure that cost is never a barrier to accessing health technologies such as COVID-19 treatments and vaccines, as any cost that reduces take-up rates of the vaccine will also significantly reduce their effectiveness in ending the pandemic.

## THE URGENT NEED FOR DEBT CANCELLATION UNTIL AT LEAST THE END OF 2021

The vast majority of states, including 17 G20 members, are party to human rights treaties that include the obligation of international cooperation and assistance, such as the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural rights. Wealthier states such as the G20 have

<sup>1</sup> Amnesty International, Amnesty analysis reveals over 7,000 health workers have died from COVID-19, 3 September 2020, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/09/amnesty-analysis-7000-health-workers-have-died-from-covid19/>

<sup>2</sup> See for example, T Kirby, Evidence mounts on the disproportionate effect of COVID-19 on ethnic minorities, *The Lancet*, Volume 8, Issue 6, JUNE 01, 2020, [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanres/article/PIIS2213-2600\(20\)30228-9/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanres/article/PIIS2213-2600(20)30228-9/fulltext).

<sup>3</sup> Amnesty International, Exposed, Silenced, Attacked: Failures to protect health and essential workers during the Covid-19 pandemic, 13 July 2020, Pol 40/2572/2020, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/pol40/2572/2020/en/>

the obligation to assist states that are struggling to mobilise adequate financial resources to respond to the pandemic, and to ensure that debt repayments do not come at the cost of protecting health, livelihoods and the right to an adequate standard of living.

It is clear that current initiatives, including the G20's Debt Service Suspension Initiative (DSSI), which will provide a temporary US\$5.3 billion relief to 42 countries, are nowhere near enough to enable the poorest countries to mount an effective response to the pandemic and to embark on a just recovery. While it is somewhat positive that the G20 Finance Ministers' communiqué of 18 July noted the possible extension of the DSSI beyond the end of 2020, we believe that the G20 can and must take bolder steps by cancelling all debt repayments due in 2020 and 2021 from at least the poorest 77 countries, and ensuring longer term debt sustainability beyond this date, based on robust human rights impact assessments. The G20 should also ensure stimulus packages support a transition to zero-carbon economies, while supporting the creation of green and decent jobs.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS TO G20 HEALTH AND FINANCE MINISTERS**

### **PROTECTION OF HEALTH AND ESSENTIAL WORKERS**

- Ensure all health and essential workers are able to protect themselves during the COVID-19 pandemic, including by increasing domestic production of PPE, promoting international cooperation in its distribution to ensure equipment can get to where it is most needed, and by reviewing domestic trade policies to ensure they do not obstruct the availability, affordability and quality of essential commodities, such as PPE, in any country.
- Recognise COVID-19 as an occupational disease, so workers who contract COVID-19 as a result of work-related activities receive compensation and medical and other care, in addition to compensation for families in the event of bereavement;
- Ensure that all health and essential workers can exercise their right to freedom of expression and association without fear of reprisals and ensure that employers put in place systems that allow workers to report on health and safety risks;
- Collect and publish data by occupation, including categories of health and other essential workers who have been infected by COVID-19, and how many have died, disaggregated on the basis of prohibited grounds of discrimination;
- Carry out comprehensive, effective and independent reviews regarding states' and other actors' preparedness for and responses to the pandemic with provide remedies and learn lessons for the future.

### **ACCESS TO COVID-19 DIAGNOSTICS, TREATMENT AND VACCINES**

- Prioritise cooperation with international mechanisms aiming to ensure global access to vaccines and treatments, and avoid solely national bilateral agreements that would undermine vaccine availability for other states.
- Call on vaccine and therapeutics developers to share their knowledge, biological material data and intellectual property with the WHO's COVID-19 Technology Access Pool (C-TAP), so that they can be licensed to other manufacturers for wider public use. Make transparency and collaboration with C-TAP a condition of public funding provided.
- Urgently assess intellectual property laws to ensure that these do not form a barrier to the availability and affordability of medicines, treatments, medical devices and medical innovations, whether within their country or in other countries.
- Ensure national and international criteria to guide the allocation of vaccines are consistent with human rights standards, pay attention to the needs of marginalized groups, and reflect the WHO's Equitable Allocation Framework. Civil society should be represented in any national and international decision-making processes.
- Provide sufficient development assistance, including through support to international mechanisms, to enable lower-income countries to purchase the vaccines they need, and ensure that cost is never a barrier to access.

### **DEBT CANCELLATION AND FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE**

- Cancel all debt payments due until the end of 2021 for countries needing such relief to respond to or recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly the 77 poorest countries, and ensure that any debt relief is in addition to funding that would otherwise have been spent on international assistance. Debt cancellation should be accompanied by robust transparency and accountability mechanisms at the national level;
- Conduct robust human rights impact assessments regarding future debt repayments, including outstanding obligations and terms of repayment, to ensure that this debt is sustainable and allows debtor countries to guarantee all persons' economic and social rights. In some circumstances this may require the implementation of further debt relief;
- Support multilateral institutions such as the UN and its relevant bodies such as the World Health Organization, and equivalent regional bodies, including by paying all regular budget assessments at the earliest date possible. Consider paying additional contributions, including to make up for less wealthy countries are unable to pay in the short term.
- Ensure economic stimulus packages actively support the transition to zero-carbon economies, including by investing in human rights-consistent renewable energy and refraining from unconditional bail-outs to fossil fuel and aviation companies. Workers should be supported through this transition to ensure green and decent jobs, and protect the right to an adequate standard of living.