



To: WHO Director-General Dr Tedros Ghebreyesus Adhanom and leadership team

Date: 25 November 2020

Subject: Dialogue session on 13 October 2020 on social participation and accountability within and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic: Follow-up on overall outcome and agreed action points

Dear Dr Tedros and team,

We highly appreciate the cooperative spirit of the 13th October meeting with WHO Director-General Dr Tedros Ghebreyesus Adhanom and his leadership team.

We are particularly happy to see that the WHO DG and leadership team are ready to engage in a discourse on looking at civil society engagement as a matter of social participation and accountability, both at national (Member States) and institutional (WHO) level.

We appreciate that Dr Tedros confirmed that technical guidance to Member States cannot be implemented without political action. This political (and diplomatic) lens is needed for promoting social participation and accountability at all levels. We agree that this is not an easy endeavour in times of shrinking civic space.

We applaud the DG for acknowledging the limitations inherent within the WHO Framework for Engagement with non-State Actors (FENSA) for dealing with WHO engagement with civil society, and also that more specific institutional policies, strategies and action are needed.

We look forward to jointly preparing the ground for implementing some of the agreed actions and perspectives, as outlined in the *enclosed memo*.

We are available for a bilateral follow-up meeting on these points, according to your availability.

Best regards,

Community of Practitioners on Accountability and Social Action in Health (COPASAH)
Geneva Global Health Hub (G2H2)
Civil Society Engagement Mechanism for UHC2030 (CSEM)
Civil Society Co-Chair of the Social Participation Technical Network (SPTN)



MEMO TO WHO DIRECTOR-GENERAL AND LEADERSHIP

Dialogue Session on 13 October 2020 on Social Participation and Accountability Within and Beyond the COVID-19 Pandemic

Follow-Up on Overall Outcome and Agreed Action Points

Below are five asks presented at the dialogue session, a description of the agreed action points and perspectives by WHO and civil society, and recommendations for follow-up.

1. Systematically involve civil society in WHO dialogue with Member States

Our proposal: “Deepen and extend the conversation on social participation and accountability within and beyond Covid-19 pandemic in follow-up meetings (jointly set-up by WHO secretariat and CSOs) with WHO Regional Directors, Member States and partner agencies in the GAP.”

In his response, the DG referred to the new project of a voluntary reporting mechanism (similar to Universal Periodic Review for human rights records of all UN Member States) and to involve civil society in its implementation. Since then, we watched with great interest the related [explanations](#) by the DG at the opening of the resumed session of the 73rd World Health Assembly. We would also like to know more about how the proposed review mechanism relates to the “State of UHC Commitment” report currently being prepared by UHC2030.

We recommend to the DG to follow up on systematic civil society engagement in the “Universal Health and Preparedness Review” process in the current step of developing a more detailed proposal to be shared with Member States.

2. Transform SPTN into a Social Participation Leadership Group

Our proposal: “Transform the “Social Participation Technical Network” (SPTN) that has been in the lead of the handbook project into a permanent Social Participation Leadership Group (SPLG) with strong and equal representation of WHO (HQ and RC), governments and civil society.”

In his response, the DG strongly supported the handbook project and stated that the related proposals can be implemented quickly. On this ground, the civil society co-chair of the SPTN, Justin Koonin, has already undertaken informal explorations with Marjolaine Nicod (UHC2030 Secretariat) and Dheepa Rajan (Secretariat of the handbook project). The draft Terms of Reference for an expanded Social Participation Leadership Group are in development.

We ask the WHO secretariat to support and promote this process, which should also involve dialogue with representatives of WHO Regions and Member State in the SPTN.

3. Overall defence and promotion of civic space

Our proposal: “Provide clear normative guidance and technical support to countries on upholding human rights, including protecting civic space & rights to freedom of expression & opinion, as a core element of COVID-19 response”

In his response, the DG stated that WHO has already signed a MoU with the Human Rights Council to help WHO incorporate rights issues in its documents, even if “pushing the rights issue is not easy”, and is expecting some resistance. In the meantime, we note with great interest the publication of the [UN Guidance Note on Protection and Promotion of Civic Space](#) under the leadership of OHCHR.

We ask that the WHO secretariat systematically support this and similar initiatives at UN level, and deepen the cooperation with OHCHR.

We invite the secretariat to explore the opportunity to jointly launch the guidance note in a Geneva event open to all Missions “in better times”, potentially as a side event to WHA74.

4. WHO-Civil Society Commission

Our proposal: Establish a related permanent mechanism for strategically dealing with issues related to WHO and social participation and accountability e.g. by setting up a permanent WHO-civil society commission or by extending the mandate of the SPTN or the proposed SPLG from the country level to the global/WHO level.

We highly appreciate the attention given to this proposal by Dr Tedros at the dialogue meeting, and in particular the DG’s “go ahead” for exploring such a permanent mechanism together. At a civil society follow-up meeting to the dialogue session on 27 October, we shared assessments on how such a commission could contribute to a better engagement of WHO with civil society as a matter of social participation and accountability, and what it could look like. We discussed:

- **Option 1:** A light and focused mechanism for providing strategic guidance on how to strengthen and promote institutional relations between WHO and civil society (including follow-up on some of the proposals above)
- **Option 2:** A full-fledged interface of WHO and civil society, to deal with a variety of technical and political matters (building e.g. on the experience of FAO’s Committee on World Food Security and its civil society mechanism).

At the same follow-up meeting, we addressed the issue of good governance and management of civil society processes. We noted that the follow-up on this permanent mechanism shall be seen as a “test case” for good and inclusive governance and management of civil society processes. Over 20 civil society organizations expressed their interest in engaging with this project; the conveners of the dialogue session are currently exploring steps to best work on a concrete proposal. We hope to get back to the WHO Secretariat by the end of the year with an outline or working document for such a commission.

We ask that the WHO Secretariat engage with this group of civil society organizations in the establishment of the Commission.

5. Multilateral and multistakeholder partnerships and platforms

Our proposal: Define and monitor an overarching framework for civil society participation and accountability in multistakeholder partnerships and platforms in which WHO is engaged, such as the ACT-A.

We appreciate the comments made by colleagues from the Global Action Plan (GAP) and ACT-A Secretariats concerning ongoing commitment to the inclusion of civil society and communities in these important processes. We welcome the progress that has already been made in incorporating civil society into them.

We ask that the GAP Secretariat develop a structured process for involving communities and civil society in the implementation phase of the GAP, particularly at the country level.

We ask that the ACT-A Hub continue to regularly engage with appointed ACT-A civil society representatives and encourage the inclusion of civil society and communities across all ACT-A pillars.

We recommend defining an overarching framework for civil society participation and accountability in multistakeholder partnerships and platforms in which WHO is engaged as part of the work of the proposed WHO-Civil Society Commission.

For further comments and follow-up:

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