**Interconnectedness and Competition in the Global Health System**

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The experience of COVID19 demonstrated the tight inter-connectednessof many aspects of the global health system. Developments in national and international travel enabled a very rapid spread of the virus and of its mutations. Big changes in communication technologies made possible the very rapid diffusion of information about the virus and new vaccines, drugs and treatment regimens. This also applied to disinformation.

The response to the crisis revealed weaknesses in existing global governance arrangements. The Sustainable Development Goals state the international consensus on the need to give priority to the strengthening of national health systems. Strategies for achieving this need to take account of the mixed nature of the health sector as both a public good and a competitive market that accounts for ten percent of the global economy. The following paragraphs outline some key characteristics of this rapidly changing sector.

The first is the competition for health-related markets and the large and growing role of China and other large middle-income countries as suppliers of health-related commodities such as pharmaceuticals, vaccines and diagnostic equipment. This competition can lower costs, but agreements are needed to ensure quality and effectiveness. Also, strategies of these countries for building export markets will need to respect the desire of importing countries to build national and regional production.

The second is the growing perception that advances in science and technology will result in major changes to health systems and health-related markets. Several countries, including China, responded to COVID19 by investing a lot of money in developing new vaccines and therapeutic agents. The use of digital heath technologies also accelerated greatly. These developments have confirmed the view that life sciences will be a strategic sector in the economies of the future. A number of governments are formulating “industrial strategies” aimed at building capacity in strategic sectors. There is increasing competition for leadership in health-related science and technology and in the creation of new international value chains. Measures are needed to build international trust and ensure that the public interest is respected and that norms and standards are established and adhered to, despite this context of competition for technological leadership. It will be important that the new value chains avoid excessive concentration of the capacities for research and development in a few countries. We should anticipate an extended period of building mutual understanding, identifying problems and negotiating rules of engagement as new technologies are adopted at scale.

The third has been a growing concern about national security. A context of low trust, lack of clear rules of engagement and limited international cooperation could greatly impair responses to future health emergencies and impede the development of effective health systems. One example is the identification of new infectious agents or ones resistant to antimicrobial agents and of countermeasures to protect populations. It will be important to reach agreement on the management of infectious disease to ensure sharing of information and scientific collaboration.

The fourth concerns the economic problems many countries face in a period of geopolitical instability. The worst affected have high levels of debt. This raises important questions about the degree to which countries will be able to maintain the effectiveness of their health system. This is especially important because some high-income countries are reducing their development assistance. The lack of a functioning health system is a threat to global health as well as to the wellbeing of the local population. The financing of these services will require global cooperation. Past experiences with international programmes of support for health system strengthening have illustrated the problems that uncoordinated interventions can create. Global discussions about debt relief and the future of development assistance need to take the core needs of basic health systems into account. Also, support to these health services need to be coordinated and rules of engagement in health markets in these countries need to be consistent with development strategies.

We are at an early stage in the creation of effective global health governance arrangements for the 2020s. It may be useful to draw on lessons from China’s experience of adapting its regulatory system to a context of rapid change which involved: (i) agreement on broad goals for global health; (ii) encouragement of local experimentation; (iii) creation of mechanisms to learn from both successes and failures and (iii) gradual establishment of enforceable rules. A similar approach could be taken to strengthening global health governance. An important initial step would be to create opportunities for exchanges of ideas between technical experts to identify priority areas for more intensive work. It will be important to ensure that stakeholders from countries at all levels of development have a voice in these discussions.