



**AGORA OF THE INHABITANTS OF THE EARTH**

**OPEN LETTER TO  
THE GENERAL SECRETARY  
OF THE UNITED NATIONS  
ON COVID-19, HEALTH AND GLOBAL  
PUBLIC GOODS**

**Annex : An Agenda for Change. Universal Rights and  
Global Public Goods**

**Brussels 7 July 2020**

# Open letter to the UN Secretary General on Covid-19, Health and Global Public Goods

Mr. Secretary General,

The UN Economic and Social Council has alerted the international community to growing inequalities in health between the world's populations, particularly when confronting the Covid-19 pandemic<sup>[1]</sup>. Since May 2020 there have been numerous appeals and proposals calling for the 75<sup>th</sup> UN General Assembly to affirm that any future Covid-19 vaccine must be a common good, a global public good, free of charge, and that the right to health for all should prevail over the interest of financial profitability and "health security" of the wealthier populations in the richest countries<sup>[2]</sup>.

However, to date, the interests of the powerful seem to be dominating the responses in the fight against the pandemic (and against poverty). As long as these structural causes, which fuel the primacy of the strongest, are not eliminated, we cannot change this course.

In the field of global health, there are three root causes of inequalities to be eradicated as a priority:

- *the right to private appropriation of living organisms for profit* introduced in legislation on Intellectual Property (as early as 1980 by the United States and confirmed, in 1998, by an EU Directive) ;
- *xenophobic nationalist tendencies in security matters* prevailing over the principle of common and shared responsibility of peoples and states for to safeguard, care for and to promoting the life of all the inhabitants of the Earth ;
- *mechanisms of global finance* that currently fuel growing wealth inequality between and within countries, privatization of savings and credit activities being among the most critical. This inequality has also been well documented in a recent UNCTAD report<sup>[3]</sup>.

In light of the above, and recognising your personal commitment to the right to life for all of the Earth's inhabitants, we ask you, Mr. Secretary General, to bring to the attention of those responsible and to support at the 75<sup>th</sup> UN General Assembly the review and approval **of** the following three initiatives :

**1. Abandoning the patentability of any Covid-19 vaccine for the years 2020 and 2021 by any private or for-profit entity, based upon rivalry of exclusive manufacture, and creating a UN's global task force to undertake a revision of the existent laws on intellectual property, so that they may be adapted to the current global requirement for this global pandemic.** The objective is to instead favor the design and implementation at both regional and global levels, under the responsibility of public policy, of a more cooperative and mutual system for the pooling of knowledge and technology in the area of health, to bring about an effective realization of the right to universal and free access to therapies against Covid-19.

**2. Promote the launch of a global program "Novel Finance for Universal Health".**

The aim of such program will be to promote a powerful autonomous, and self-generative capacity for the production and the accumulation of sustainable financial resources from the so-

called "poor" nations, emphasizing the regeneration of public savings banks, public credit institutions, public insurance companies, and especially close international South-South cooperation agreements, while also incorporating a transformed World Bank, which will gradually become the world's « deposit and consignment bank ». Included in this must be a ban on derivatives and hedge funds activity in the area of health; the elimination of tax havens and a novel taxation on grand fortunes. The increase of local autonomous financial resources is fundamental, especially in those areas of other activities relating to common and public goods essential for life (such as water, food, energy, housing and, last but not least, education).

**3. Forming a working group charged with evaluating and formulating proposals on the creation of a World Security Council for global Common and Public Goods (to start with: water, health, knowledge).** The Council would have a three functions : **alert/oversight** (observation, anticipation, detection of emergencies, risk assessment) ; **initiative** (preparation of dossiers for the public authorities responsible for supervision, proposals for legislative interventions...) ; **sanction** (where there were to be a failure to respect the security of public health institutions).

**Vaccines, Finance and Security, these are the three main axes of our proposals.**

We offer you a gracious thank you in advance, for your kind attention and your sympathetic consideration of these proposals as part of your commitment to a just common global public health policy.

We wish you a fruitful General Assembly.

## **Agora of the Inhabitants of the Earth**

### Notes:

[1] Report published on 22<sup>nd</sup> of July 2020 by the ECOSOC High Level Segment: "Multilateralism after COVID-19: What kind of UN do we need on its 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary?" <https://www.un.org/pga/74/wp-content/uploads/sites/99/2020/08/Letter-from-President-ECOSOC-to-PGA-Outcome-of-the-Multilateralism-Session.pdf> .

[2] Here we cite the dozens of Heads of State and of Governments on who issued a statement on behalf of the President of South Africa and calls from hundreds of prestigious personalities from the world of science, economics and of culture, Pope Francis, Oxfam, Doctors without Borders, and other NGOs, including our small organisation "Agora of the Inhabitants of the Earth".

(3) UNCTAD Trade and Development Proposals: South-South Cooperation at the time of COVID-19 [https://www.southsouth-galaxy.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/gdsinf2020d4\\_en-1.pdf](https://www.southsouth-galaxy.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/gdsinf2020d4_en-1.pdf)

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Alphabetical order. 176 Signatories from 33 countries

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# **An Agenda for Change**

## **Universal Rights and Global Public Good**

Dear Secretary-General

We are writing on behalf of “Agora”, a world-wide network of citizens committed to advancing global issues of health, water and food<sup>(1)</sup>. With this text we have the honor to bring to your kind attention some specific thoughts and a supplementary proposal to the Agora’s call on the international community to rally around the concept of **global public goods** in addressing the unprecedented global crisis and challenges brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Human rights are at the very centre of the recovery**

With deep appreciation of your leadership and efforts since the outbreak of the pandemic, we seek your support in mobilizing responses to the crisis, which are rooted in the UN universal human rights that address its health, socio-economic and security missions in an integrated manner.

The pandemic has exposed in the starkest possible way the inequalities and injustices that characterize human and political relations in the world today. We fully share your view that frontally addressing these conditions, these deeply entrenched violations of human rights, should be at the very center of the recovery. The realities we are facing today render timely and compellingly, what may have appeared until now unrealistic, or even utopian.

Indeed, the pandemic is dramatically driving home that, as long as there continue to exist stark inequalities in access to public health goods, no one – rich or poor – will be safe, and no one can be sure of being spared. No one country can hope to succeed alone, which is why Governments, everywhere, must act together without delay in a spirit of close cooperation in the interest of all inhabitants of the Earth. We must enter the era of the “**world of global public goods**”.

### **Global public goods : an agenda for a new world social contract**

We strongly believe that the concept of global public goods is a concept around which the international community can rally and build a renewed sense of common purpose.

We are encouraged by the stances you have personally taken in calling for a new social contract and a new generation of social protection policies and safety nets, including universal health coverage. We were also pleased to see that the international discourse at the United Nations, including in the Security Council and the General Assembly, is increasingly calling for an

enhanced focus on global public goods as an integral part of the effort to give the United Nations a renewed and more inclusive sense of its mission as it marks its 75th anniversary.

The approach to the concept of global public goods set out in the letter is guided by a vision of politics and society that binds us members of “Agora”. But the concept is anchored in the universal principle of the right to life and in internationally agreed political, economic, social and cultural rights. It should be pursued as an indispensable instrument for realizing the commitment *to leave no one behind* that all governments have subscribed to in Agenda 2030 and so avoid that commitment remaining a mere declaration.

We believe that the notion of *res publica*, or global public goods, provides the underlying principle for framing the response of the international community to the COVID-19 crisis and also global health challenges in the future, and offers a way out of the blind alley situation that we are in. It also offers a basis for overcoming the now entrenched, single-minded ideological reliance on financial market and private corporations, all in the North.

**The principle of universal access, indeed free access, as a right, to a COVID-19 vaccine is increasingly uniting people across the globe.** It should be the basic instrument for operationalizing human rights across current divides and restoring trust, the social contract between citizens and the state, and a genuine democracy based on the participation of all.

## **The challenge for science and technology Beyond commodification, privatisation and militarisation**

Much remains to be done to free our societies from commodification, privatization and militarization of life under a compelling and competitive utilitarian conception and vision of science and technology, particularly in the fields of life science/biotechnologies and cognitive sciences/artificial intelligence.

Today, more than 50,000 patents on living organisms and even higher figures in the field of artificial intelligence have transferred key decision powers on the future from the public to the private space. This has led to the emergence of new social global divides: information divide, digital divide, health divide, knowledge divide, education divide, to name but a few. Health and knowledge must today be recognized as global public goods in order to halt processes that deepen global fractures and gaps between haves and have-nots, and which have been so starkly highlighted in the ongoing COVID-19 crisis.

Accordingly, we would like to suggest that an additional and important step for the United Nations should be a deliberate effort to leverage the potential of innovation driven by science and technology to urgently promote open, inclusive debates on issues and policies, using COVID-19 as a platform and a stepping stone in this direction. Responding to the yearning of peoples to regain influence and control of their individual, group, national and common destinies is currently perhaps the main political challenge facing citizens, civil society and governments at all levels. To be true to the spirit of its mission, the United Nations must also do its part to contribute to the democratization of policy development and promote the appropriate policy decision mechanisms and institutions at global level - the relevant open public space - to cope with issues of universal concern (building the “*world res publica*”).



With this need in mind, we consider that a global United Nations webinar, under your auspices as Secretary-General, should be organised on the theme of “*Global public goods and COVID19: seeking solutions to human health and sustainable development needs*”. Such a webinar would act as a platform on which representative actors and thinkers concerned – from both South and North, and from different walks of life, many of whom are not and cannot otherwise be heard or noticed globally – to express their views.

We are copying this document to the Presidents of the General Assembly and ECOSOC, to the Executive Director of WHO, to the Secretary-General of UNCTAD, as well as to the chairs of the Group of 77 and of Non-Aligned Movement in New York. We feel strongly that the initiatives we are proposing can make a contribution in support of a universal rights and justice-guided world recovery Agenda 2030.

The initial online dialogues outlined in this letter should in turn contribute the necessary impetus to accelerate global action in this important direction. In this effort you Mr Secretary-General and the organization as a whole can count on the wholehearted support individually and collectively of all members of Agora.

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