



INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT LAW ORGANIZATION

STATEMENT BY THE DIRECTOR-GENERAL, Ms JAN BEAGLE

World Health Day

7 April 2021

Today we commemorate World Health Day 2021, on the theme of building a healthier, fairer world.

In 2020 countries and regions were divided between those with access to adequate health care facilities to treat people with severe COVID-19, and those without. Today these disparities continue and are compounded by the lack of access to effective COVID-19 vaccines to prevent illness and death.

Effective public health law frameworks are an important means for the realization of SDG 3 (healthy lives and well-being for all). They are essential to enable progress towards universal access to health coverage and the development of well-functioning public health systems.

COVID-19 has underlined the importance and challenges of managing, coordinating, and expanding the key building blocks of a well-functioning health system. At both global and local levels, the law is a powerful tool for promoting the right to health. It can also help to ensure the effective prevention and management of public health emergencies consistent with human rights and rule of law principles.

IDLO believes that human rights and the rule of law – based in international solidarity and cooperation, a human rights-based approach and people-centred justice – must also be at the centre of the COVID-19 response and recovery. This is the pathway to a fairer, healthier world.

The right to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health is a fundamental human right. It is recognised in the Preamble of the World Health Organization, and in different forms in international treaties ratified by every UN Member State.

Governments have a central role in addressing health inequities – this is why IDLO is contributing to building capacity to address the underlying causes of non-communicable diseases in East Africa and South Asia, including by reducing unhealthy diets and physical inactivity. Our focus is not only on government capacity but also on the participation of civil society and the role of the academic sector in supporting necessary legal reforms.

In collaboration with WHO, IDLO is working to strengthen legal and policy frameworks to prevent, detect and promptly respond to public health emergencies of international concern and other public health risks, including COVID-19.

Next month the World Health Assembly will debate the social determinants of health, such as poverty, poor housing and limited access to education, gender inequality, and unemployment. In every country and region, the social determinants of health have been undermined by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Good governance and the rule of law are central to managing the COVID-19 crisis and addressing the social determinants of health. Every UN Member State has international legal obligations to take steps

to address these determinants to the maximum of their available resources, and to request international assistance where needed. States and others in a position to assist have the responsibility to respond. We recall that cooperation is at the heart of our international legal order, including in global health - anchored in the 1945 Charter of the United Nations and in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

In January, the WHO Director-General warned that the lack of equitable access to vaccines has led us to the brink of a catastrophic moral failure. In February, the UN Secretary-General affirmed that vaccines must be a global public good, accessible and affordable for all. Vaccine equity is also a human rights issue, and a strategic and economic imperative.

The pandemic has highlighted that we live in an interconnected world, and that no one is immune to its effects. Amid this global health emergency, we must recognise that international solidarity and cooperation need to be at the heart of addressing our shared challenges. Adopting a human rights and rule of law-based approach is crucial to ensuring we can respond and recover, together.