

**WIPO Director General Daren Tang Remarks
COVID-19 and Vaccine Equity: What Can the WTO Contribute
Wednesday, April 14, 2021**

Dr. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, Director General, World Trade Organization (WTO)

Dr. Tedros Ghebreyesus, Director General, World Health Organization (WHO)

Honorable Ministers,

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my pleasure and honor to be with all of you. Since this is the first time I am taking the floor before the WTO community, I would first like to congratulate Dr. Ngozi on your landmark appointment as the first female and African DG of the WTO, and to reiterate WIPO's full support for the critical work that you and your team are doing.

I also wish to take this chance to express my support for the work of Dr. Tedros and the team at WHO, who, amongst UN agencies, are bearing the brunt of the intense work needed to handle the pandemic. WIPO is likewise here to give our full support to you and your team.

Let me be clear at the outset that WIPO, like all other UN agencies, supports equitable access to vaccines. It is not possible for us to create vaccinated bubbles, when new strains of the virus can evolve from anywhere in the world and spread everywhere. It is also not right for us to tolerate vaccine inequity in a world which has become a global village.

However, in these difficult and challenging times we can take comfort in the ingenuity of humankind, and in the incredible achievement that barely a year after the WHO declared a global pandemic, there are already 13 approved vaccines, with a hundred further vaccine candidates in the pipeline.

Regardless of the type of vaccines, what underpins these tremendous achievements are innovation and intellectual property (IP). In particular, the incentives provided by the IP system have encouraged investments over decades in health related innovations, which in turn have played a part in the delivery of 800 million doses of vaccine worldwide.

However, 800 million is not 7 billion. While WTO members are engaging on the difficult and sensitive issue on whether a TRIPs waiver is needed, we need at the same time to take action and start working together to accelerate vaccine manufacture.

This is no easy matter. Vaccines are not chemical compounds, but much larger compounds of a different order of complexity. To manufacture vaccines at the required quality and effectiveness, it is not enough to focus on patents, which are the blueprints for manufacture. Expertise and deep know-how is also needed, just as a blueprint for building a house needs skilled bricklayers, electricians and plumbers to convert it into an actual house.

Since know-how is largely held within companies, or the supply-chain of companies involved in manufacture of vaccines, to achieve results it is important that we work with industry, and this is why this afternoon's meeting rightly involves everyone in the vaccine manufacturing ecosystem.

WIPO, as the UN agency for IP and innovation, stands ready to work with the WTO and WHO to further support and facilitate these partnerships and collaboration. As partners in a trilateral agreement for over a decade, we can bring value to this process, given our respective expertise in different areas that are intimately connected to our common goal of ensuring vaccine equity.

Supporting the licensing of technology to enable good health outcomes is also what motivated WIPO to join the Board of the Medicines Patent Pool as a non-voting member. Our MOU with MPP envisages that we work with them to build expertise and capabilities in Members for the negotiation of licensing deals and technology transfer relating to covid-19.

We stand ready to scale this type of support in other contexts as well, and it is our hope that today's meeting will be able to result in some concrete steps in this regard.

Separately, WIPO is also ready to support any of its 193 Member States in understanding how best to balance the needs of IP and health in its domestic context. Just last year, we advised over 20 countries in various aspects of IP, including, in certain instances, on how to find the right balance between health outcomes and supporting innovation. We have conducted studies for WIPO Members in the issue of the exercise of compulsory licenses under TRIPs. In the end, we believe that IP is a powerful tool for economic, social and cultural advancement, but a highly technical tool that Members will sometimes need help to wield skillfully. And we are here to provide that help.

Beyond the immediate tasks at hand, we also need the world to build for the future. As devastating as the pandemic has been, we know that it is merely one in many cycles of pandemics that have afflicted the human race, and it will not be the last.

This is why the gap we face in the lack of capacities and capabilities for vaccine manufacturing in the world needs to be plugged, and new innovations to deal with future pandemics need to be spurred. As such, we support efforts to look at future pandemics, and will be happy to bring our expertise on IP and innovation to the table in those discussions.

Innovation and ingenuity are among the defining characteristics of the human race. IP has been a powerful tool for supporting and encouraging innovation, and has played a part in the fastest ever development of viable vaccines, as well as the creation of technologies that have allowed us to communicate, collaborate and coordinate through virtual means. This is why we believe IP continues to be part of the solution to our common global challenges.

WIPO, as the UN agency for IP and innovation, is ready to step up and play its role in working with WTO and WHO, as well as with Member States, industry and other stakeholders in overcoming this pandemic, and building for a pandemic-proof future.

I thank you for your attention.