

The Role of AICESIS in Recovering from COVID-19 and Furthering Implementation of the UN Sustainable Development Goals

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Dear colleagues, allow me to welcome you on behalf of the International Association of Economic and Social Councils and Similar Institutions.

The global crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has affected all areas of life, not only disrupting plans to achieve the UN SDGs adopted in 2015 but also largely postponing pre-existing progress in this area by several years.

Undeniably, the most acute problem since the pandemic began has been equal access to free, quality universal healthcare, followed by the disastrously inequitable distribution of vaccines. This is also the view of UN experts, who have recognized that the setback in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals has had a particular impact on SDG 3: “Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages.”

The crisis has forced the global community to put on the agenda such issues as providing healthcare services to vulnerable groups of citizens, equal access to healthcare and medicines, strengthening international partnerships to exchange information on research, encouraging people to get vaccinated and mutual recognition of vaccines from different countries. Nevertheless, the process of vaccine distribution and registration has been politicized in a way never seen before: life-saving medicines have become a political tool in the hands of certain developed countries.

The role of civil society institutions, among other things, is to draw the attention of society and government to the most pressing problems and to search for solutions. We need to ensure that healthcare is not influenced by political structures, and that pharmaceutical companies are more socially responsible. The ultimate goal of these measures would be the increase of access to vaccines and medicines for those who need them the most.

The pandemic and the resulting lockdowns have tested eHealth systems and off-the-shelf digital health services around the world and contributed to an unprecedented breakthrough in the digitalization of healthcare. At a time when many people have been deprived of the opportunity to go to medical appointments, digital health services have been at peak demand from both health professionals and patients. The penetration and use of various digital health services and applications in people's lives around the world has increased manifold over the past two years.

However, despite the explosive growth of digitalization in healthcare, a number of countries, particularly on the African continent, were helpless in the face of the pandemic: not only did the population lack vaccines, but also ordinary masks and other personal protective equipment. Even now, in some regions, people simply do not have access to medical care, much less to vaccinations. And against some diseases there are no vaccines at all.

In this regard, the Civic Chamber of the Russian Federation, which has presided over the International Association of Economic and Social Councils and Similar Institutions since October 2021, has, as part of its two-year presidency program "Living in the Online Age: looming challenges and urge for solutions," proposed a roadmap of measures to depoliticize healthcare and de-commercialize the global coronavirus vaccination campaign, which will certainly facilitate a return to the pre-crisis course towards the Sustainable Development Goals for all. We would like to raise with the world community the issue of developing a supranational regulation that would eradicate manifestations of monopoly and other dishonesty in business in

the pharmaceutical and healthcare sectors, and exclude political influence on the recognition and distribution of vaccines and medicines.

At the end of the two-year presidency, we plan to prepare a final report that includes recommendations from civil society on overcoming these problems. We intend to present this report at the UN High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development under the auspices of the Economic and Social Council.

Since the de-politicization of healthcare and ensuring equal access to vaccines is one of the main themes of the current AICESIS presidency, we perceive it as critical to intensify joint efforts to increase international cooperation in the healthcare sector. Here we count on the support of all our partners and colleagues, including within such an authoritative platform of the UN system as the Economic and Social Council.

Under the current conditions, it is especially relevant to build a new level of interaction between society and government and between national-level organizations and global international players in forming unified approaches to responding to such global challenges. The International Association of Economic and Social Councils and Similar Institutions can now become one of the key platforms coordinating civil society structures around the world in order to strengthen cooperation between the world's interconnected economies and international partnerships in implementing the Sustainable Development Goals.