

EU and US block moves for greater access to essential medicines for world's poor

The battle lines have been drawn at the World Health Organization in Geneva. On one side many countries from the South, led by Brazil, India and Bolivia supported by NGOs, are pushing for changes to guarantee much greater access to essential medicines for the world's poor. On the other side the European Union, under the Spanish Presidency, and the US, are ignoring the demands for access to medicine and are overtly blocking any progress at the WHO to assure affordable prices or technology transfer of life-saving drugs of neglected diseases.

This confrontation took place at the Executive Board of the WHO that met in February to study the report of the Expert Working Group on the financing of R&D for essential medicines. The tone of the debate was especially hot due to accusations that the expert report had been manipulated and heavily lobbied by large pharmaceutical interests that had enjoyed privileged access to internal documents and to the members of the expert panel.

It was considered scandalous by many observers that after months of work the expert panel had totally ignored the proposals of countries from the South to de-link Research and Development (R&D) costs from medicine pricing, to study prize innovation schemes, to promote technology transfer to the South and to initiate new intellectual property strategies including patent pools to both bring down radically the price of the most drugs and to boost research into neglected diseases. As reflected by leaks the Expert Working Group had faithfully followed the instructions of the Pharmaceutical lobby's organization IFPMA. According to notes by industry lobbyists accompanying the leaks of confidential internal WHO documents "the report is totally fair to industry" and "the overall result [of the working group's report] is in line with most of the industry positions on this matter," but states as well that "there is still room for them to introduce new language".

While Brazil, India, Bolivia and Thailand voiced serious concern and even successfully demanded an internal investigation into the lack of credibility of the process, the European Union, the US and others voiced no objections to the report and even tried to prevent an open-ended review of its content. The disturbing contradiction is that while no one denies that the present medicine market excludes nearly half of the world's population, the EU refuses to accept any serious discussion of changes in the status quo of the intellectual property regime concerning essential medicines that could save millions of lives. Upon being pressed by the representative of the Transatlantic Consumer Dialogue (TACD) at a WHO side meeting organized by the EU under the Spanish Presidency, European Commission representatives from the DG Sanco and from DG Research refused to clarify the EU position on access to medicine nor to explain why they rejected the proposals of Southern countries and NGOs such as Medicines Sans Frontier and Health Action International. Privately, and on a related issue, a high-level Spanish official admitted that the EU was going too far in trying to force Latin American countries into very restrictive IP chapters of bilateral Free Trade Agreement.

While the EU verbally supports the global health objectives of the UN's Millennium Objectives and devotes important economic resources to that objective, its political actions at international forums such as the WHO to date seem to reflect a staunch defense of "business as usual" or the interests of large industrial lobbies. This contradictory EU position on access to medicine surely deserves more attention and scrutiny by the European Parliament and by European public opinion.

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