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Health Action International PRESS RELEASE

Governments drive R&D to meet real health needs – changes in sight?

Amsterdam 10 November 2007 – The World Health Organisation (WHO) Intergovernmental Working Group for Public Health, Innovation and International Property (IGWG) has met over the past week in Geneva. The group, convened to discuss improved medicines research and development for the world's poor countries, agreed on basic principles for a Global Strategy and Action Plan.

"We welcome the move towards public responsibility in health research where the market fails to meet real health needs", says Dr Christian Wagner-Ahlf of Health Action International.

Eighty percent of the world population lives in developing countries and nearly half survive on less than US\$ 2 a day, often not being able to afford medical treatment. Their specific health needs have been neglected for decades by commercial pharmaceutical research and development (R&D).

The IGWG Action Plan foresees a mix of different incentives to promote R&D for products for developing countries. As the current patent-based system targets developing countries' needs insufficiently, alternative and complementary models need to be developed and implemented.

A group of Latin American countries, among which Brazil, called for patent refusal on findings stemming from public funded research, yet the concept was rejected by several countries.

Fierce discussions on patents dominated the meeting. Reference was made to the World Trade Organization's TRIPS agreement, which clearly states patents should not prevent member states from taking measures to protect health. "Low-income and transitional countries have to be supported in the implementation of compulsory licensing measures" stressed Dr Christian Wagner-Ahlf.

Lively debates ensued on the diseases to be taken up in the Action Plan. In addition to neglected diseases (which affect mainly low-income countries), the Plan will also focus on chronic conditions of global concern, such as diabetes. Yet, as to the latter, details are still unclear, since the pharmaceutical industry is keen in sustaining their lucrative market in the Western world.

Medical research in developing countries shall be strengthened and technology transfer should be promoted as to increase local production.

In general, governments have not committed to undertake any concrete actions and the financing of the Action Plan is still to be determined. Nevertheless, after intense negotiations, a follow-up meeting has been scheduled for April 2008.

Strict limits set to public participation

The fact that the debate was only open to country delegates led to considerable criticism of the procedures. Although having received accreditation for the one-week meeting, many NGOs were excluded from listening to the negotiations onsite. In addition, external experts (appointed beforehand by certain governments) were hardly able to contribute to the negotiations due to strict rules of order.

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Further information on the Intergovernmental working group on Innovation, Public Health and Intellectual Property (IGWG PHI) can be retrieved from the official website: <http://www.who.int/phi/documents/en/>