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Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development

The Covid-19 situation: “No-one is safe until everyone is safe”

Declaration

adopted by the Committee on 1 December 2021

1. The Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development is very concerned about the rapidly evolving Covid-19 pandemic situation in Europe and worldwide. Much of Europe is currently in the grip of a wave of the highly contagious Delta variant of the coronavirus, already straining health services in many countries. The arrival of the Omicron variant, which has been declared a variant of concern by the World Health Organization (WHO) due to the unprecedented number of spike mutations which could imply even higher contagiousness, as well as a possible immune escape from both vaccines and prior infection, looks set to make a bad situation worse.
2. The Committee insists that “no-one is safe until everyone is safe”. Global equitable distribution of vaccines – if necessary, updated to counter the Omicron variant – is vital in order to protect public health. We must stop the virus from circulating by vaccinating vulnerable groups and healthcare workers everywhere to avoid more death and disease, and further damaging our economies. Member States must refrain from contributing to market conditions that substantially disadvantage countries with less economic power. Stronger commitment to funding a global response and support of a TRIPS¹ waiver is needed so that no one is left behind. Moreover, Council of Europe member States should recognise all anti-Covid vaccines developed by them, as well as all WHO-authorised vaccines.
3. Low vaccination rates in many countries, including some European countries, are, however, not only attributable to problems with vaccine production and distribution logistics or financing. Vaccine hesitancy, fuelled by misinformation and distrust in government, is making it more difficult to obtain progress in vaccination rates. The time has come to follow WHO advice, and not only invest in strong vaccine education campaigns, but also start the debate on mandatory vaccination.
4. We must face the reality that we are not going to be able to immediately vaccinate ourselves out of the current Delta surge, let alone the coming Omicron one. The Committee thus calls on all Council of Europe member States to immediately take – in a human rights-compliant manner – the necessary measures to lower infection rates, including tried-and-tested barrier methods such as mandatory mask-wearing inside, but also, as necessary, shutdowns and lockdowns.

¹ The World Trade Organisation Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights.