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**Population and sustainable development, in
particular sustained and inclusive economic growth**

Statement submitted by International Federation of Medical Students' Associations, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council¹

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

¹ The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

It is undeniable that the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic has been a pivotal moment in our development and evolution. All the populations and communities of the world have been affected by the pandemic, but at the same time have learnt from it the importance of setting health at the centre of decision-making and that “health in all policies” is an approach that must be followed in all sectors.

The International Federation of Medical Students’ Associations recognizes the importance of reflecting on the COVID-19 pandemic and identifying the lessons learned on the negative economic and social impacts that pandemics and other health emergencies can pose to societies. Mitigating these emergencies is necessary – through reliable strategic frameworks that can ensure adequate preparedness and resilience of societal systems including, but not limited to, health systems. The International Federation of Medical Students’ Associations also recognizes that focusing on achieving Universal Health Coverage through a mitigation approach is much more cost-effective and beneficial than spending to control outbreaks.

The International Federation of Medical Students’ Associations believes that the current estimation of economic costs of events caused by disease is limited in its scope, including detailed direct healthcare costs but only limited information on the indirect costs such as wages loss and informal health costs related to patient care, among others. This limitation can cause more detrimental consequences, as data on all costs is required for informed decision making by relevant stakeholders, to ensure a stronger connection to broader economic development agendas.

In addition to the extraordinary circumstances during health emergencies, it is of utmost importance to highlight the value of health equity in shaping healthier societies. Health equity cannot be achieved without adequate focus on the determinants of health, which include but are not limited to personal, social, economic, and environmental factors. This indicates that the socioeconomic situation of individuals and populations can have an evident relation with health. In fact, those who are in a more advantageous financial position tend to have better health outcomes and better health habits whereas those in a lower socioeconomic position live with worse health outcomes, which is especially apparent in countries where wealth disparity is high.

Moreover, economic opportunities have been shown to be positively associated with self-reported overall, physical, and mental health. Since economic factors are closely connected with health, ensuring that economic policies are formed in a way that is conscious of their effect on health is imperative for improving public health.

It is also important to recognize the detrimental impact low socio-economic statuses can have on mental health. Studies have shown that poverty can hinder access to basic healthcare and increase the vulnerability of individuals to stressful environments and factors predisposing to mental illnesses, thus increasing their prevalence in the community.

All that has been mentioned already in regard to health equity and the focus on the determinants of health in normal circumstances and during health emergencies can only be beneficial if our approaches are inclusive of all age groups and emphasize all aspects of health including physical, mental and social well-being.

One of the main target groups we need to provide more attention to is adolescents. Adolescence is a critical phase and a unique developmental period in an individual’s life. Adolescents are vulnerable to specific conditions and risks due to the rapid change of social behaviours and processes of brain maturation. The International Federation of Medical Students’ Associations views adolescence as a

key period of physical, cognitive, emotional and social development. Our organization believes in the need for extended measures to protect and care for the health of adolescents. We should ensure that our activities do not focus only on their physical health but also on their mental health owing to the high prevalence of mental disorders such as depression and anxiety among adolescents worldwide. This will be possible through reducing the significant gaps in data and research in terms of adolescents' health and the impact of the different determinants on their health.

Another neglected group is the older population, who experience more physical and mental illnesses than the rest of the population resulting in a significant economic burden on themselves and their communities. A key component of adequate health system for ageing populations is to have a sufficient health workforce in geriatrics and gerontology. The poor structural respect to and low salaries of health workers in these fields have a negative impact on the quality and quantity of the health workforce.

This situation results in a negative stereotype imposed on older populations despite their significant economic contributions to their societies through their participation in the formal or informal workforce – often beyond retirement age – taxes and consumption, and transfers of assets and resources to their families and communities. Moreover, the broader retention in the workforce – among those who wish or need to continue working – has the potential to enhance labour productivity.

Finally, the International Federation of Medical Students' Associations calls for full and meaningful engagement of all stakeholders to take interdisciplinary action to understand the impact of the socio-economic determinants of health and ensure preparedness for health and non-health-related emergencies, while taking inclusivity measures to ensure that no one is left behind, during normal health circumstances or health emergencies. The International Federation of Medical Students' Associations firmly believes that there can be no healthcare without tackling all determinants of health, and therefore immediate action is needed towards achieving social justice, regardless of age, socio-economic status and any other determinant of health.
