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Statement submitted by Council on Health Research for Development, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 30 and 31 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.



Statement

Investing in research and innovation in low- and middle-income countries: moving from aid to taking the lead in creating health, equity and development

Over the past decade, low- and middle-income countries have experienced tremendous economic growth, higher quality governance and improvements in most indicators related to health, equity and socioeconomic development. As a result, countries relying on aid to supplement national budgets are seeing that aid being reduced as a direct consequence of their development.

In low- and middle-income countries, research and science are mostly funded from external sources and focus almost exclusively on agriculture and health. Supporting national research and innovation systems has generally not been seen as core to development collaboration. Now that the economies of low- and middle-income countries are improving and aid is diminishing, especially in countries transitioning to middle-income status, the national science and innovation systems that are the very engines of development in higher income countries are not ready.

The failure to reach some Millennium Development Goals is a case in point. Achievement of the three health-related Goals was intended to be supported through a global health research fund, as proposed by the Commission on Macroeconomics and Health, but this never happened. The more recent report of the Commission on Social Determinants of Health made three recommendations, one of which was to greatly increase research for new interventions and for measuring progress and impact. Even more recently, the Consultative Expert Working Group on Research and Development: Financing and Coordination of the World Health Organization (WHO) proposed a global health research observatory. Without securing sustainable funding, however, these more recent proposals are also unlikely to succeed.

The current incentive systems for drug research and development fail to address the needs of low- and middle-income countries, leaving millions without affordable access to the products required to treat, cure or prevent disease. Global health research financing remains poorly coordinated with national research and development agendas so that, for example, after decades of providing vaccines to children in Africa, that continent still has only one vaccine producer that has been pre-qualified by WHO. This is hardly sustainable development: it remains “relief”.

The primary drivers of national research and innovation systems continue to be the countries themselves; secondly, there are international bodies and bilateral cooperation agencies. Advancements in the global availability of drug, vaccine and health technology has greatly increased since some low- and middle-income countries began producing their own medicines, vaccines and technologies, and marketing them more widely — even delivering higher quality and better solutions to the high-income countries that were providing them with aid not long ago.

It is clear to us that strong research and innovation systems for health are key to improving equity, creating jobs, generating a culture of evidence-informed decision-making, encouraging greater foreign direct investment and promoting independence from aid.

We call on the Economic and Social Council and its member States to support our call for countries at all levels of economic development to increase their own investments in science, technology and innovation to improve health, increase equity and support country-led socioeconomic development.

Targeting a percentage is a clumsy goal. Aiming instead to emulate what has been done by countries that have successfully climbed the development ladder in recent decades is a far better choice.
