

A Study of the Response of the Non-Alignment Movement to the COVID-19 Crisis

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Abstract

The Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), a 120 Member organisation, being the largest collective voice of the developing world, has voiced its concerns regarding the adverse impact of COVID-19 crisis. The article would study how the NAM has responded to the COVID-19 articulating the interests of the Global South. On May 4 2020, an online Summit level Meeting of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) Contact Group in response to COVID-19, under the theme of “United against COVID-19 pandemic” was held and the declaration adopted at end of the summit outlined the position of NAM calling for global solidarity to fight the pandemic. The article would also study the role played by NAM in multilateral bodies such as the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) and the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC). The Non-Aligned Movement has been at the forefront to point out in multilateral forums against disparity in the distribution of vaccines against COVID-19 between developing and developed countries. NAM has also supported the World Health Organisation’s (WHO) Declaration on Vaccine Equality. The article will thus study how the Non-Aligned Movement articulated the interests of the Global South in times of COVID-19 crisis.

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic turned out to be *annus horribilis*, in particular, for the developing world. The pandemic not only became a major public health emergency but its effects permeated to virtually all facets of the society, resulted in severe economic hardships for the developing countries. The pandemic not only put a heavy strain on the national healthcare systems, particularly in the developing world, it also had an adverse economic impact leading to a disruption of supply chain globally and as a result, subsequent disruption of international trade. This generating sharp fluctuations in the financial markets, triggering shocks to consumer demand and producing a wide range of negative effects in crucial industries including transportation and tourism (Morgan 2020, Mishra 2021).

As per the 2022 World Development Report that was released by the World Bank, economic activity contracted in 2020 in about 90 percent of countries. In 2020, the starting year of the COVID-19 pandemic, the global economy declined by approximately 3 percent, and global poverty increased for the first time in a generation. The report stated that the economic effects of the pandemic will be more persistent and severer for emerging economies. The output of 40 percent of advanced economies witnessed a recovery in 2021 and was higher than their 2019. However, low- and middle-income nations were slow to cover and the corresponding figures for them were 21 percent and 27 percent respectively (World Bank 2022a: 1-2). In January 2022, the World Bank stated that, “in emerging and developing economies, however, growth is expected to drop from 6.3 percent in 2021 to 4.6 percent in 2022 and 4.4 percent in 2023” (World Bank 2022 b). The World Bank also estimated that emerging and developing economies will see their output reduced by 4 percent as compared to the pre-COVID

time (World Bank 2022 b). The countries which have the lowest level of development, those that are landlocked and those which can be termed as Small Islands Developing States (SIDS) are the most severely affected.. According to the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) estimates in 2020 the income losses in the developing nations were expected to exceed \$220 billion. As 55% of the people globally are devoid of access to social safety, these income losses would have further negative effects impacting social sectors such as education and in extreme cases impacting, basic food security and nutrition (UNDP 2020).

The developing world has also faced high mortality rates. According to a 2021 study commissioned by Brookings, the lower middle-income countries witnessed a spike in mortality rates. An excess mortality rate (difference between observed and expected deaths due to COVID) was 35 times higher for countries that are classified in the for Low Middle-Income bracket. The number of excess deaths including non-reported COVID deaths was significantly higher than actual reported COVID deaths, and this was particularly witnessed in the developing nations .. Hence the study concludes that the COVID-19 crisis has been a developing country pandemic (Gill and Schellekens: 2021).

The Response of the Non-Aligned Movement to the COVID-19 crisis

The Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), a 120 Member States body, is the second only to United Nations in terms of grouping of states and is the largest forum where the developing world can put forth its collective voice. Ever since its inception in 1961, the Movement has shaped its ideology according to the international scenario in a manner that best suits the interests of the developing world. Multilateralism has been a core tenet of NAM. Multilateralism literally means “many-sided” and is

formed of the Latin words “many, and “latus”, side. To put it simply, multilateralism can be understood as the coordinated diplomatic interaction of three or more states (or other actors) (Pourghazian 2021). According to Scott (2019), apart from this quantification, multilateralism is marked by certain quantitative principles. These principles are indivisible differences among the participants in the global order, diffusion of reciprocity and settlement of conflicts through the means of a defined behaviour. The principle of indivisibility implies that peace is indivisible and forbids war for one entity if the conducts of other entities are peaceful. The principal of diffusion of reciprocity implies that there will be a balanced conduct among the entities in the global order. The principle of settlement of conflict through the means of a defined behaviour implies that the entities in a global order base their actions on certain prescribed norms. NAM regards multilateralism as the basic edifice on which the international order rests. NAM accords utmost importance to the “United Nations and its Charter as central to maintaining a peaceful and secure global order and fostering cooperation between States. NAM firmly believes that the United Nations is the central forum for adhering to multilateralism in the international order and addressing the globally challenges and issues that arise” (Non-Aligned Movement 2019).

Non-Aligned Movement has stayed relevant even in the post-Cold War era and the end of bipolarity in the global order ; NAM constantly continues to articulate the interests of the developing world with respect to major issues impacting them; one such issue is health. As regards the health sector, NAM Member States have reiterated their dedication to to achieve Universal Health Coverage by 2030. During 18th Summit of Heads of State and Government of the Non-Aligned Movement, that was held on 25- 26 October 2019 in Baku, Azerbaijan, the Heads of State and Government of NAM Member States accorded a positive response to adoption of General Assembly resolution 73/131 entitled “Universal Health Coverage: Moving Together to Build a Healthier World” (Non-Aligned Movement 2019) and in accordance with the Resolution recognised that health is a precondition for and an outcome and indicator of all three dimensions — economic, social and environmental — of sustainable development and that, despite progress made, challenges in global health, including major inequities and vulnerabilities within and among countries, regions and populations, still remain and demand persistent attention (United Nations 2018). The Non-Aligned Movement also accords a high priority to the Political Declaration of the High-level Meeting on Universal Health Coverage adopted on September 23, 2019. According to the “universal health coverage implies that all people have access to health services without discrimination, irrespective of their ability to pay” (United Nations 2019 a). The Declaration advocates “to boost efforts to create resilient health-systems, improve primary health care and to ensure access to affordable medicines and vaccines for all” (United Nations 2019 a). Non-Aligned Movement representing the largest collective voice of the developing world, has raised its concerns regarding the adverse impact of COVID-19 crisis. NAM’s response to the COVID-19 crisis has been in line with the above two mentioned important health initiatives by the UN. Azerbaijan, which is currently the chair of NAM, has put forth a number of successful global initiatives underlining NAM’s response to the COVID-19 crisis. Notable initiatives include the organisation of a summit-level meeting of the NAM Contact Group in response to the COVID-19 crisis, ‘establishing a consolidated database on the basic humanitarian and medical needs of NAM Member States’ (Apa.az 2020) and interventions in various UN forums namely

General Assembly and the Human Rights Council (HRC) which have resulted respectively in their fight against the pandemic, convening the Special Session of the UN General Assembly on COVID-19, and adoption of a UNHRC resolutions that calls for an equitable, affordable, timely and universal access to the COVID-19 vaccine. For the Non-Aligned Movement, equitable and non-discriminatory distribution of vaccines against COVID-19 is a factor that guarantees the basic right to health to millions of people across the developing world.

NAM has urged its Member States to work together and strengthen their health systems so that their vulnerable population has access to basic health facilities. . The Communiques of the Coordinating Bureau of the Non-Aligned Movement on “the COVID-19 Pandemic” of 25 March 2020 raised its concern over the steep rise of the COVID-19. The Communique stressed “upon the significance of multilateralism in addressing the pandemic and called for strengthening international cooperation, in line with the Charter of the United Nations and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development this crucial moment”(Non-Aligned Movement 2020b:1).

On the initiative of Azerbaijan President, Ilham Aliyev, who is also the chair of NAM, an online summit was organised by the Non-Aligned Movement Contact Group in response to COVID-19 on May 4, 2020. The summit was called “United Against COVID-19” and was joined by over 40 heads of state and government in Europe, Asia, Africa and Latin America(Jafarova, 2020). The summit was committed to the fight against the worldwide pandemic- the coronavirus disease. One of the objectives of the summit was to intensify coordination among member states in fight against the COVID-19 pandemic(President of Azerbaijan Republic 2020 a). In his opening, statement, on the ‘online summit-level meeting of the Non-Aligned Movement Contact Group in response to COVID-19’ the United Nations Secretary General Antonio Guterres stated that COVID-19 crisis had “exposed the fragility of our societies and economies to shocks, and it has laid bare deep inequalities that threaten the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals and that the developing countries needed massive support to address the gaps in their health systems and also to deal with the social and economic consequences of the pandemic”(United Nation 2020 e).. The UN Secretary-General remarked that representing two-thirds of UN Member States, the Non-Aligned Movement has a pivotal role to play in forging global solidarity. There were three immediate priorities: ending the Covid-19 pandemic, addressing its socio-economic impacts of the pandemic, and enhance recovery and relief efforts ensuring that all the sections of the society benefit from such efforts. (United Nations 2020e).

Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the Director General of the World Health Organization, was also one of the prominent speakers at the summit. In his address, he stated the importance of multilateralism and diplomatic cooperation were needed to an effective response of countries to COVID19 crisis. Dr Tedros said that the continued multilateral engagement of the Non-Aligned Movement was vital for tackling COVID-19 (Ghebreyesus 2020). The President of the 74th Session of the United Nations General Assembly, Prof. Tijjani Muhammad-Bande, who also participated in the virtual summit commended NAM Member States for their joint efforts in the fight against the pandemic. Bande stressed the importance of engaging all stakeholders in the fight against COVID-19, which included governments, multilateral institutions, the private sector and civil society . It was imperative to ensure to respond to the specific requirements of communities, and also to ensure non-discrimination in treatments and access to vaccination (United

Nations 2020b).

The summit was addressed by the leaders of the NAM Member States. K P Sharma Oli, the Prime Minister of Nepal, stated that the Non-Aligned Movement must make use of its numerical and moral strength to achieve global unity at this critical juncture. He stressed the importance of South-South Cooperation and highlighted the significance of experience-sharing and, transfer of technology, medical logistics and equipment. He also emphasised that NAM must coordinate and advocate for launch of a recovery package from the international community to tackle the imminent economic recession (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Nepal MOFA 2020). The Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi emphasized the significance of a coordinated, inclusive and equitable response by the world to the COVID-19 crisis, outlined the steps India had taken both at the domestic and international level and reaffirmed India's willingness to offer assistance in solidarity with the Movement, to the extent possible (Press Information Bureau 2020).

Following the Summit, NAM adopted a Declaration which underlined the significance of global cooperation in the fight against COVID-19. This in line with the United Nations General Assembly Resolution A/RES/74/270, entitled "Global solidarity to fight the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19)" adopted on April 2, 2020 and A/RES/74/274, entitled "International cooperation to ensure global access to medicines, vaccines and medical equipment to face COVID-19" adopted on April 20, 2020.

The NAM Declaration stated that mitigating the negative effects of COVID-19, required a coordinated response on the global level based on the pillars of unity, solidarity and renewed multilateral cooperation (United Nations 2020d:2). The Declaration reiterated the importance NAM accords to multilateralism as a core tenet in international relations and outlined that multilateralism and international cooperation could play a major role to promote and support the three pillars of the United Nations – peace and security, development and human rights (United Nations 2019 b). The Declaration supported the efforts of the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the frontline role it was playing to address the COVID-19 pandemic that included providing guidance, training, equipment and concrete life-saving services (Guterres 2020)..

It was also decided in the Declaration that a Non-Aligned Movement Task Force will be established. The function of this Task Force would be to formulate a database that would highlight the medical and humanitarian requirements of the Member States of the NAM. This database would then be submitted by the NAM Chair to all the, "donating countries, international organizations that work for humanitarian causes, , international financial institutions, transnational private entities implementing social responsibility projects and others for possible support and assistance (Non-Aligned Movement 2020c).

During the Summit, the President of Azerbaijan also announced the donation of 5 million USD to the WHO to support the most affected NAM Member States (President of Azerbaijan Republic 2020 a). Azerbaijan further launched an initiative to hold the UN General Assembly special session on COVID which was supported by an absolute majority of the international community. Azerbaijan also launched the initiative in United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC), to ensure vaccine equality and access for vaccines to all (President of Azerbaijan Republic 2020 b).

The Mid-term Ministerial Conference of the Non-Aligned Movement held on July 13 and 14, 2021, in an online mode

further deliberated on the adverse impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the developing world. The Political Declaration issued after the Mid-term Ministerial Conference recognised the importance of strengthening of primary health care systems to provide an effective response to not only COVID-19 but other pandemics also. It also highlighted the significance of universal health coverage and vaccination programs. The Declaration also expressed concerns the disparity in distribution and availability of COVID-19 vaccines between high and low income countries. This disparity was exacerbating the crisis. The Declaration also appreciated the role of the COVID-19 vaccine donor countries and called on more countries of the developed world to do the same avoiding politicisation. The Declaration also highlighted the role of COVAX in ensuring fair access and equitable distribution of vaccines (Non-Aligned Movement 2021)..

on the initiative of the Non-Aligned Movement that a Special Session of the UN General Assembly in response to the COVID-19 pandemic was called on December 3-4, 2020. (United Nations 2020a). Ilham Aliyev, the President of Azerbaijan, and the Chair of Non-Aligned Movement, was one of the keynote speakers at this session in the latter capacity. The NAM Chair reiterated the principled position of NAM stressing the role of global solidarity and ensuring equitable access to vaccines as integral to effective pandemic response. Aliyev also highlighted a significant contribution of the Non-Aligned Movement in COVID-19 response mentioning that the WHO was making use of the database providing by NAM as one of organisation's reference points to identify what was required in NAM Member states to address the COVID-19 crisis. The NAM Chair also reiterated the Movement's support to the WHO and its leadership in "their critical role in providing guidance, training, equipment and concrete life-saving services, in order to ensure effective response of the international community to the ever-increasing challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic" (President of Azerbaijan Republic 2020 b). The statement by the NAM Chair that an effective and coordinated response to the COVID-19 crisis was contingent on ensuring equitable access to vaccine. In conclusion, Aliyev highlighted the principled position of NAM that in order to offset the negative effects of the COVID-19 crisis and recover from it, a coordinate global approach was required which respected the principles of multilateralism, international cooperation and human rights (Non-Aligned Movement 2020d).

The Non-Aligned Movement has also been actively participating in multilateral forums and voicing the concerns of the developing world caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. At the NAM summit, Azerbaijan, the NAM Chair, launched an initiative to hold a special session of the UN General Assembly on COVID-19 crisis. This received an absolute majority support of the international community. Azerbaijan also launched the initiative in United Nations Human Rights Council, that aimed at providing fair and equitable vaccine distribution, particularly for the developing world. One of the major issues constantly highlighted by NAM is that of eliminating vaccine inequality and thereby striving towards vaccine equity. According to the UNDP, "Vaccine equity means that vaccines should be allocated across all countries based on needs and regardless of their economic status. Access to and allocation of vaccines should be based on principles grounded in the right of every human to enjoy the highest attainable standard of health without distinction of race, religion, political belief, economic, or any other social condition. High-income countries started vaccination on average two months earlier than low-income countries and vaccination coverage in low-income countries is still strikingly low" (UNDP

2022). Data clearly shows the prevalence of vaccine inequality with reference to the less developed countries. According to the 2022 United Nations Finance for Sustainable Development Report, “Vaccine inequity remains high—the number of vaccine doses per 100 people in least developed countries (LDCs) stood at just 23.9, against 147.4 in developed countries” (United Nations 2022: XIII). The UN recognises that boosting access to vaccines in developing countries is key to stopping the undermining the global and regional supply chains as the production systems are interconnected. In October 2021, International Chamber of Commerce’s Secretary-General, John Denton, warned that “the global economy stood to lose as much as \$9.2 trillion, with developed countries shouldering half the cost, if governments failed to ensure developing countries’ access to COVID-19 vaccines” (UNCTAD 2021).

During the 46th session of the United Nations Human Rights Council, Ecuador and Azerbaijan on behalf of the Non-Aligned Movement tabled a Resolution “Ensuring equitable, affordable, timely and universal access for all countries to vaccines in response to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic”, which was adopted without a vote on 23 March 2021. The contents of this Resolution highlight the approach of the NAM towards countering COVID pandemic.

The Resolution recognised that for everyone to enjoy the right to of physical and mental health. It is imperative that vaccines, medicines and latest health technologies are available to all. The Resolution stressed the importance of ensuring universal health coverage to all without any discrimination and also underlined the access to healthcare services as well as to medicine supply should not financially overburden the poor and marginalised section of the society

The Resolution also expressed concerns over the increasing disparity in access to COVID-19 vaccination between the high and the low income countries and stated that this chasm was a major hindrance in completely eliminating the pandemic, which in turn was also hampering the realization of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

The NAM Resolution also highlighted the significance of multilateralism and international cooperation in ensuring that developing States(including the least developed States), in particularly, should have affordable, timely, equitable and universal access to COVID-19 vaccines so that not only the adverse effects of the pandemic can be addressed in these countries but also it can be ensured that the pandemic will not resurface again.

The NAM Resolution concerns that the COVID-19 further allayed concerns that the COVID-19 crisis had exacerbated the economic inequalities and had further deteriorated the economic and social condition of the marginalised sections of the society, which included , migrants, refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs), older persons, the disabled, the minorities, the homeless and the poor., NAM Resolution stated there was a need to ensure non-discrimination and equality in access to COVID-19 vaccines and to promote measures that could take into account such factors age, gender and disability while ensuring the access of COVID-19 to all sections of the society.

The Resolution by NAM also stressed the important role of the Access to COVID-19 Tools (ACT) Accelerator initiative and called for strengthening the COVID-19 Vaccine Global Access (COVAX) Facility.. Non-Aligned Movement has urged the countries to fund and support the ACT Accelerator Initiative and its related mechanisms, such as the COVID-19 Vaccine Global Access (COVAX) Facility, to support the “equitable distribution

of diagnostics, therapeutics and vaccines and to further explore innovative financing mechanisms ”(WHO 2020) in order to ensure the worldwide access to COVID-19 vaccines which will, in turn, lead to a strengthening of essential health services.NAM has also appealed to States to remove any unjust hindrance that can restrict the export of COVID-19 vaccines. NAM believes that such hindrances further widen the inequality in access to COVID-19 vaccine between the developed and developing world. A removal of such obstacles that restrict exports would lead to elimination of vaccine inequality and lead to an end to the current pandemic. This, in turn, will ensure that all enjoy the right to physical and mental health, in its highest attainable standard.

The Resolution presented by NAM also reaffirmed that States have the right to use the provisions of the World Trade Organization Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS Agreement) and the flexibilities therein, as reaffirmed in the Doha Declaration on the TRIPS Agreement and Public Health (United Nations 2022 a:7). This declaration recognised that the interpretation and implementation of the agreement should be understood in a manner that supports the right of every State to promote public health, ensuring equitable distribution of COVID-19 vaccine and also to enhance coordination with the private sector to ensure that such vaccines are adequately manufactured and distributed and are affordable for all (United Nations 2022 a:7)

The Non-Aligned Movement also given a call that COVID-19 related vaccines should be declared as global public good and said that efforts need to be accelerated to ensure that COVID-19 related diagnostics, therapeutics and vaccines should be accessible and affordable for all in an equitable manner (Non-Aligned Movement 2020a).

In December 2021, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution on equitable access to COVID-19 vaccines. This resolution was initiated at the behest of Azerbaijan in its capacity of the Chair of the Non-Aligned Movement. The Resolution was further endorsed by 126 countries (Lmahamad 2021). Akin to the Resolution presented by the Non-Aligned Movement in the UNHRC, the NAM Resolution “ Ensuring equitable, affordable, timely and universal access for all countries to vaccines in response to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic” adopted by the UNGA on December 16, 2021, takes into account the concerns of developing world in combating the COVID-19 pandemic, stressing the significance of international solidarity and the need to eliminate vaccine inequality” (UNGA 2021:16-17).. The Resolution reiterated that the United Nations systems had a fundamental role to ensure the organisation of global coordination in controlling and containing the rapid rise of COVID-19 pandemic and assisting the States in this regard. The Resolution also recognised the central role played by World Health Organisation, in accordance with its constitutional mandate. The Resolution stressed the significance of the ACT Accelerator Initiative and said that this initiative along with the related mechanisms could ensure an effective and equitable access to COVID-19 diagnostics, therapeutics and vaccines for all countries. The Resolution also highlighted the significance of the ‘Vaccine Pillar’ of the COVAX Facility(Third World Network 2021). The Resolution called on States to establish such mechanisms which could facilitate the trade in, acquisition of, access to and distribution of COVID-19 vaccine which would form an integral part of their responses to the pandemic. This would not only address the pandemic but also ensure that all subjects enjoy the highest possible standards of physical and

mental health which were in accordance with those outlined in the Sustainable Development Goals (Third World Network 2021).

The Resolution presented by NAM also welcomed the decision of the International Monetary Fund to allocate special drawing rights to boost global liquidity and augment the resilience of the international monetary system and called on countries to consider voluntarily channelling unutilized special drawing rights, according to country-specific laws and regulations, to the countries which are most in need, including the middle-income countries, to better support sustainable development and a more inclusive recovery, and stresses the importance of ensuring equal access to such resources, ensure a prompt and worldwide to COVID-19 vaccines.

The Non-Aligned Movement has also urged Member States to learn from the experience of the COVID-19 crisis and enhance their preparedness for any pandemic that may occur in future. For this, States need to augment their preparedness and capacity as prescribed under International Health Regulations (2005)¹. NAM also believes that international instruments such as a WHO Convention can be developed that will formulate guidelines and a plan to action on preparedness and response of a pandemic (United Nations 2021).

CONCLUSION

The response of the NAM to the COVID crisis shows that the Movement continues to be relevant in the contemporary world and removes all apprehensions about it. NAM has shown that it remains the largest collective forum from which the developing world articulates its best interest. The above discussion clearly manifested that it was the Non-Aligned Movement that raised the problems faced by developing countries both during and after the COVID crisis. Not only has the NAM remained firm in its commitment to multilateralism, the Movement has also demonstrated the collective power of the global South, as is evident by the Resolutions on COVID-19 and vaccine equity introduced in multilateral bodies such as the UNGA and the UNHRC. NAM's response and its active involvement in multilateral forums in determining a global concerted response to the crisis shows that the Movement has adopted itself in line with the contemporary international situation and is a manifestation of the collective power of the developing world.

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