**SUMMARY**: On September 21st, the APEC Health Working Group (HWG) convened its first-ever virtual meeting. Canada, represented by OIA Branch Head, Michael Pearson, co-chaired the meeting alongside Malaysia, represented by Deputy Director General for Health (Public Health), Dato’ Dr. Chong Chee Kheong. Member economy participants included Australia, Brunei Darussalam, Canada, Chile, China, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, Philippines, Republic of Korea, Russia, Singapore, Chinese Taipei, Thailand, United States, and Vietnam. The meeting featured the endorsement of the HWG Strategic Plan 2021-2025. The meeting also featured a discussion on infectious diseases, other than COVID-19, and emphasized the need to continue dedicating resources to address these diseases amid the pandemic. Furthermore, a discussion on COVID-19 highlighted how the pandemic has influenced vaccine acceptance and uptake, the importance of equitable access to an eventual COVID-19 vaccine, the economic impacts of vaccine preventable diseases, as well as the pandemic’s impacts to mental health.

The following key items and deliverables were endorsed:

* HWG Strategic Plan 2021-2025; and,
* The 10th High-Level Meeting on Health and the Economy Joint Statement.

**DAY ONE**

*Monday, September 21st, 2020*

1. **OPENING SESSION**
   1. **Senior Official Welcome Remarks by the Secretary General of Malaysia’s Ministry of Health, the Honourable Dato’ Seri Dr. Chen Chaw Min**

The meeting began with opening remarks led by the Honourable Dato’ Seri Dr. Chen Chaw Min, Secretary General of the Ministry of Health, Malaysia. In his remarks, Dr. Chen emphasized the importance of working as a collective to come up with a structured response with respect to COVID-19. He also noted that member economies should not lose sight of other health threats such as non-communicable diseases (NCDs).

* 1. **Introductory Remarks by HWG Co-Chairs**

HWG Co-Chairs, Dato’ Dr. Chong Chee Kheong (Malaysia) and Mr. Michael Pearson (Canada), provided introductory remarks where they thanked member economies for their commitment in participating in the first HWG virtual meeting, and emphasized the importance of discussing and exchanging best practices and lessons learned, particularly in light of COVID-19.

In particular, Dato’ Dr. Chong noted that it is imperative that APEC member economies rally together and strengthen existing cooperation and collaboration in order to come to a structured response to help revive and re-stimulate economic growth in the region. He expressed his disappointment that Malaysia was unable to host the HWG in Penang, as initially planned. However, he thanked everyone who worked hard to make the virtual meeting possible.

Mr. Pearson offered his condolences for those who have lost their lives and expressed his sympathies to those whose lives have been drastically affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has reinforced the importance of international collaboration to protect the health and safety of its populations. Noting the valuable discussions at the SOM1 meetings, Mr. Pearson recalled the Special Discussion on Surveillance Strategies and Management of what was then called 2019-nCoV. He also reflected on the HWG Statement on COVID-19 highlighted the economic and health impacts of the virus in the region on March 23, 2020.

Mr. Pearson then noted the number of economies virtually present, to seek whether the HWG had achieved quorum. Despite the several time zones, the HWG achieved quorum with 20 of 21 APEC economies present, a first for the HWG.

* 1. **Adoption of SOM3 HWG Meeting Agenda**

As it is customary at HWG meetings, Dato’ Dr. Chong opened the floor to any comments of the draft of the HWG SOM1 2020 Meeting Agenda, and hearing no comments, the Agenda was adopted unanimously.

1. **10th APEC HIGH-LEVEL MEETING ON HEALTH AND THE ECONOMY AGENDA AND JOINT STATEMENT**
   1. **Presentation**

Dato’ Dr. Chong provided a brief overview on the HLM10 and its Joint Statement. Outlining this year’s HLM theme, ”Building a Resilient Asia-Pacific in a COVID-19 World”, he indicated the HLM will look into highlighting how economies can invest in health, which will in turn aim to drive sustainable and inclusive economic growth. Dato’ Dr. Chong opened the floor to any comments of the draft HLM10 agenda, and hearing no comments, the Agenda was adopted unanimously.

Dato’ Dr. Chong then turned to the main outcome of the HLM, a joint statement from the HWG and LSIF. A draft of the Statement was circulated in advance of the meeting, reflecting the HLM’s anticipated discussions. Seeing as there were no substantive comments or questions on the statement, member economies agreed that the APEC Secretariat would circulate the statement for another round of consultations with the aim of its final endorsement at the HLM10.

1. **GOVERNANCE UPDATE**
   1. **Formal Endorsement of HWG Strategic Plan 2021-2025**

Mr. Pearson led the discussion on the governance documents, which included the formal endorsement of several key HWG documents such as the HWG Strategic Plan 2021-2025. Mr. Pearson thanked all member economies for their work and comments on the Strategic Plan, and noted that he was pleased that the group was able to produce a key document that will guide the working group over the next five years.

Mr. Pearson outlined that to full the Strategic Plan’s mandate, mission and vision, the HWG will work in three pillars: (1) project and policy development; (2) communication, collaboration, and cooperation; and (3) governance. Mr. Pearson opened the floor for any comments.

Canada intervened and noted that it viewed the HWG Strategic Plan as a key document to outline the work group’s activities, but also to link to broader global health discussions between the nexus of health and the economy. China requested a revision to current draft to emphasize the principle of consensus. During the meeting, the HWG Co-Chair’s Office drafted a sentence to address China’s request. The language was presented again to HWG members, and the Strategic Plan 2021-2025 was formally endorsed.

* 1. **Formal Endorsement of The North Star – A Healthy Asia-Pacific**

Mr. Pearson then turned to the North Star document, which is to replace the Healthy-Asia Pacific 2020 (HAP 2020) Initiative and Roadmap. Mr. Pearson noted that unfortunately this was not endorsed during the LSIF meeting. However, he did indicate that he was pleased that the HWG collaborated so strongly to review the North Star in the lead up to the SOM3 2020 meetings.

LSIF Chair, Ms. Erika Elvander, provided further comments on the North Star by highlighting the strength of the document for both fora, and how collaboration on the North Star is very important as we move forward to the next decade. She also noted that during the LSIF meeting, an economy expressed concerns related to process and invited that economy to speak. In terms of next steps, Ms. Elvander noted that a robust discussion on the North Star will occur at the SOM1 LSIF Meeting in 2021, and that she looks forward to continued collaboration between the HWG and LSIF and to the endorsement of this document in the near future.

Mr. Pearson opened the floor to comments from the HWG on the latest draft of the document. The Philippines, supported by Thailand, commended all member economies for their collective efforts to reaching the HAP 2020, however, expressed interest in awaiting a comprehensive review of the HAP 2020 Initiative prior to the endorsement of the North Star. The session concluded with Mr. Pearson highlighting that the Co-Chair’s office will take these comments into consideration while determining next steps before SOM1 2021.

* 1. **APEC Management Update**

Mr. Johnny Lin, APEC HWG Program Director, provided an update from the APEC Secretariat for 2020.

In his presentation, Mr. Lin provided an overview of both project sessions in 2020. During Project Session 1, the HWG submitted twelve concept notes, of which only one was approved. During Project Session 2, the HWG submitted ten concept notes, of which seven were approved, which is the highest record for one session in three years. Mr. Lin highlighted that this success could be attributed to priority alignment and funding arrangements. Regarding the new protocol for reviewing concept notes, he noted that some of the challenges economies may face would be finding three co-sponsors, submitting everything on time, and providing rationales and timelines for comments.

For future project sessions, Mr. Lin encouraged economies to continue planning for in person meetings but remain flexible for virtual meetings. He also noted that some of the expected priorities for Project Session 2021 would be the free flow of essential medical goods, vaccination, health systems improvement, and any other COVID-19 related topics.

1. **APEC ACTION PLAN ON VACCINATION ACROSS THE LIFE COURSE**
   1. **Overview Presentation**

Ms. Erika Elvander, LSIF Chair, began a discussion on the APEC Action Plan on Vaccination Across the Life Course. In her remarks, Ms. Elvander noted that it has become even clearer that APEC needs a long-term vision to work cooperatively regarding the development and uptake of vaccines across the region. As such, the vision of the Action Plan is that by 2030, all member economies implement sustainable and resilient vaccination across the life course, and protect the health and wellbeing of all individuals, going beyond childhood immunization.

* 1. **Discussion**

As co-lead of the sub-working group on Vaccination in the HWG, Canada highlighted that it sees the Action Plan as an invaluable opportunity to help further coordinate overall APEC efforts to improve vaccination. It also noted that the Action Plan builds on the HWG’s Vaccination Program of Work 2020-2021, dubbed VPoW.

China noted that it is important that the group is having this initial discussion on the Action Plan, and stated that once member economies have discussed how the document will be used and there is consensus, then the group can move to endorsing it. Japan noted that it had already submitted comments on Pillar 7.1; however, did not see the comments reflected in the latest draft, and thus would like to review the document again. Thailand welcomed the Action Plan but noted that it had some additional observations. Brunei Darussalam noted that it would provide the Secretariat with further input. It was agreed that these additional comments and reflections would be incorporated that member economies will seek to endorse the Action Plan intersessionally before SOM1 2021.

1. **APEC INFECTIOUS DISEASES UPDATE**

In light of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, HWG members engaged in the exchange of information with WHO Regional Offices on critical infectious disease trends, in an effort to facilitate greater regional collaboration on cross-border health threats. WHO Regional Office representatives region – the Western Pacific Regional Office (WPRO), and Pan-American Health Organization (PAHO) – were invited to speak. Dato’ Dr. Chong noted that this was the second “APEC Infectious Disease Update” held during a HWG meeting following the inaugural discussion during the SOM1 HWG meeting in February 2020, where member economies agreed to make this a standing agenda item.

* 1. **Regional Update on Infectious Disease Trends, other than COVID-19**

Dr. Marcos Espinal presented on behalf of the Pan-American Health Organization (PAHO). He began his presentation by providing a brief update on the status of infectious and communicable diseases in the Americas region. He noted that the Americas region has a long history regarding the control of communicable diseases, such as polio and malaria. Regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, Dr. Espinal highlighted that there have been important economic disruptions in the Americas. The most impacted services have been on routine services, as well as prenatal care and family planning services. Other challenges also include reallocation of resources, and the disruption in community services and activities. In response to the impacts of the pandemic in the region, countries have developed strategies to address some of the challenges. This includes increasing access to telemedicine services, and optimizing drug alternatives. PAHO has also accelerated delivery of supplies and commodities through engagement of key strategic partners. Dr. Espinal noted that for the Americas, the key lesson learned is that there is a need to continue dedicating resources to communicable diseases.

Dr. Huong Tran presented on behalf of the WHO Western Pacific Regional Office (WPRO). She began her presentation by providing an overview of the infectious disease situation in the Western Pacific region. Dr. Tran noted that over the past year, the region has observed a resurgence of measles import-related outbreaks in a number of member states. In terms of the impacts of the pandemic, she highlighted that similar to the Americas region, this has had an impact on immunization programs in the Western Pacific region. However, she noted that compared to other regions in the world, the Western Pacific region reported the lowest number of cases and deaths. She also noted WPRO’s commitment to work with member states to continue to address the infectious disease burden in the region.

* 1. **Guided Discussion**

Following the presentations, Dato’ Dr. Chong opened the floor for member economies to share their own experiences on infectious disease trends and management, noting an emphasis on non-COVID-19 related challenges.

The Philippines highlighted that it has experienced outbreaks of infectious diseases and continue to be susceptible to emerging and re-emerging communicable diseases. The Philippines also acknowledged the importance of international collaboration in dealing with these outbreaks.

China invited a representative from China CDC to provide an overview on China’s experience in infectious disease control and prevention. In its overview, China encouraged member economies to ensure that there is a functioning system in place to detect outbreaks of other diseases quickly.

Indonesia proposed to have further discussions in global and digital health, and noted that it would incorporate its input into the report.

Chinese Taipei noted that it would share their intervention with the Secretariat. Chinese Taipei also thanked the PAHO and WPRO regional offices for sharing their experiences and initiating the important dialogue regarding infectious diseases in the APEC region.

Due to time constraints, Canada provided a written intervention, noting the importance of continuing to engage WHO and continuing discussions on infectious diseases in the region.

1. **ADDRESSING IMPACTS OF THE PUBLIC HEALTH RESPONSE TO COVID-19**
   1. **Panel Discussion: Management of the COVID-19 Response across the APEC Region – Current Approaches and Future Direction**

In order to provide APEC member economies the opportunity to discuss COVID-19, the HWG meeting had a dedicated discussion on current approaches and future directions in addressing the pandemic. The panel discussion, moderated by Mr. Pearson, included brief presentations from representatives from the WHO, Gavi, as well as health systems expert from the US.

Mr. Pearson began the discussion by noting that COVID-19 has required the introduction of numerous public health measures such as lockdowns, physical distancing, and the closing of certain businesses and services. He also noted that the public health measures that have been adopted worldwide have clearly had significant impacts on the health and wellbeing of many across the world. For example, he highlighted how issues related to mental health have significantly become clear because of the pandemic. He noted that it is important for all to recognize how much this public health crisis is having an effect on all aspects of our society, and therefore, having different panelists provide different points of view is critical to understanding the varied responses to the pandemic.

Ms. Lisa Menning, Team Lead, Demand and Behavioural Sciences, Essential Programme on Immunization at the WHO provided the first presentation. She began her presentation by acknowledging the APEC Action Plan on Vaccination. She spoke briefly to the impact on routine immunization programs as well as vaccination campaigns, and how her team is preparing for vaccination delivery. She noted that vaccines are the most powerful inventions in medicine, and will be the fastest and safest tool to achieve the immunity we eventually need to control the pandemic. She also highlighted that the world is seeing a disruption in vaccine services, which is posing a challenge to immunization programs. While the world is currently focused on the development of a COVID-19 vaccine, we should not lose sight of the fact that other vaccines are also being developed for other diseases.

Mr. Wilson Mok, Head of Policy at Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, provided the second presentation, an overview of the global mechanism to secure COVID-19 vaccines, which is the COVAX facility. He noted that the idea behind the creation of the COVAX facility is to support a large portfolio of vaccine candidates, which is critical to ensure that there is enough manufacturing capacity globally to support countries, as well as to recognize that some will succeed in development and others will not. Mr. Mok also highlighted that the WHO is working closely with member states on a Global Allocation Framework to reduce COVID-19 mortality and protect health systems, which will significantly improve the well-being of populations and reduce the impact on societies and economies. This will enable vaccines to be allocated and received by all countries to target high-risk groups.

Ms. Beatriz Ayala-Öström, a health systems expert from the United States, provided the third presentation where she touched on the economic impacts of the pandemic. She noted that the economic impacts of COVID-19 are felt across sectors. She also noted that the level of pandemic preparedness differs across economies, and stressed the need to build resilient and scalable health systems to recover safely and stronger. She provided some recommendations to consider as economies work through their recovery efforts. Most notably, she highlighted that economies need to determine what appropriate policy options are needed to strengthen health systems resilience. For instance, strengthening health system supply chains as well as the scalability and resilience of delivery systems in the APEC region could help support pandemic preparedness, response, and recovery efforts.

Unfortunately, due to technical difficulties a video by the APEC Digital Hub for Mental Health was not played. However, the Digital Hub’s presentation was uploaded to the APEC meeting documentation website for member economies to access.

* 1. **Discussion with International Experts**

Mr. Pearson thanked the panelists for their presentations and noted the importance of the word ‘resiliency’, as well as commitment and collaboration, from a public health guidance perspective. Unfortunately, due to time constraints, Mr. Pearson, as moderator, was unable to have a discussion with the experts and proceeded with having a guided discussion with member economies.

* 1. **Guided Discussion**

Following the presentations, Mr. Pearson opened the floor for questions and remarks from member economies.

Malaysia provided presentation slides to support their intervention, and included their current epidemiological situation as well as their six key strategic approaches to controlling the COVID-19 pandemic. The six strategic approaches include public health interventions; diagnostic testing; movement control order; evidence-based approach and issuance of guidelines; risk communication; and isolation and treatment of all cases. Malaysia noted that this strategy is interlinked and complementary across government and non-government agencies. Malaysia also highlighted some key lessons learned including the need to work together, through whole-of-government and whole-of-society approaches, to contain the spread of COVID-19, the need for citizens to modify their behaviour, as everyone must play their part in practicing and maintaining the new normal, as well as the need to have an empowered and engaged community.

The Philippines intervened and noted that an Inter-Agency Task Force on Emerging Infectious Diseases was created in 2020 to manage their COVID-19 response. This will enable them to combat the virus and to ensure that the economy is on the road to recovery. The Philippines also noted that it has expressed interest to join the WHO Solidarity Vaccine Trial.

Indonesia noted that it has approached religious leaders and intensified information to educate the community on the importance of vaccination. Indonesia also highlighted that it intends to conduct an online survey by the end of September 2020 to know whether people have understood the importance of vaccination.

Reflecting on Ms. Ayala- Öström’s recommendation on cross-fora collaboration within APEC to strengthen infectious disease response in the response, Canada highlighted that it would welcome the expansion of key policy dialogues and discussions to include partners such as the APEC Agricultural Technology Group and the Emergency Preparedness Working Group. Canada also stressed the importance of mental health in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. Canada noted that a key priority in its response has been to support the mental health of its population and as such has launched key resources and tools. Finally, Canada emphasized the need to consider the secondary impacts of COVID-19 including mental health.

China intervened and highlighted that it spared no efforts to develop and adopt a prevention and control strategy. So far, its approach to dealing with the outbreak of COVID-19 has been effective, as the country has adopted a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach. China also emphasized that there is nothing more important and urgent than combatting this pandemic.

Singapore’s intervention highlighted the work of the Multi-Ministry Task Force in coordinating the pandemic response across multiple sectors. Singapore noted that it managed to minize the importation of the virus, since the beginning of the pandemic, by tightening border controls. Singapore also noted that it contained the transmission of the virus through rapid identification. To date, the infection rates in Singapore remain under control within the community. Singapore highlighted that it is working with other APEC member economies to keep supply chains open and facilitate travel.

Chinese Taipei’s intervention emphasized the importance of collaboration on digital health to combat COVID-19 in the APEC region, and noted its appreciation of the support it received to establish the Digital Health Working Group.

Thailand echoed the importance of ensuring that the supply chains of medical supplies are not disrupted during the pandemic and emphasized the need for the HWG to work together with other relevant fora and working groups to ensure this does not happen. On mental health, Thailand noted its support for the intervention made by Canada on mental health, and encouraged member economies to include a mental health response in their national COVID-19 strategies.

Mr. Pearson thanked all member economies for their thoughtful and insightful contributions to the discussion.

1. **END OF YEAR: STATUS UPDATE**
   1. **HWG Key Activities & Outcomes**

Dato’ Dr. Chong provided a high-level overview on the progress to date on key activities and deliverables during this unprecedented year, including governance, policy and technical, and cross-fora deliverables.

In his overview, he noted that 2020 was an unprecedented year for the HWG and early on the group decided to adapt some of the key deliverables to the new COVID-19 reality. As a result, economies endorsed a Work Plan addendum highlighting the changes in the HWG’s key deliverables for the year.

* 1. **KPI End of Year Status Update**

In order to conclude the meeting on time, Michael Pearson, offered to have the Co-Chairs office send the KPI End of the Year Status Update to members by email. This email was sent to HWG members on September 23rd. With no comments received, the KPI document was considered to be agreed by HWG Members by October 2nd.

* 1. **2021 New Zealand Update**

In recognition of the time in New Zealand, the Co-Chairs turned to New Zealand to provide their brief update on their APEC 2021 host year. After considerable thought, New Zealand has decided that the most practical decision would be to host all APEC meetings virtually with shorter than usual meetings. While further details will be determined following their general election next month, New Zealand noted that it would be designing a calendar that looks like a relatively normal APEC year.

1. **CLOSING SESSION**
   1. **Closing Remarks**

Mr. Pearson and Dato’ Dr. Chong concluded the meeting by thanking participants for their participation. Mr. Pearson also highlighted the success of the meeting, despite the virtual nature of the meeting and the different time zones, and noted that they were looking forward to the HLM10. After these remarks, Dato’ Dr. Chong adjourned the meeting.