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AIDS: G8 has to pay for Generic Drugs

A logical consequence of the mounting debate on the access to drugs in poor countries, AIDS is on the agenda of the G8. Indeed, governments and backers must abandon the wait-and-see policy that they had maintained for 20 years.

However, as during the United Nations Special Session at the end of June, announcements and discussions around the creation of the global Fund launched by Kofi Annan last April, are likely to elude the real debate posed by access to health and drugs and maintenance of intellectual property in poor countries.

On the one hand, money announcements from rich countries take place while these countries have drastically reduced their official development assistance (ODA), a part of which is intended for the fight against AIDS, for the last 10 years.

On the other hand, this Fund looks like a diversion maneuver : the announced amounts are ridiculously low; there has been a dilution of objectives and a return to an all-prevention strategie which obscure the issue of production and access to generic drugs in poor countries, as well as the debate on the WTO TRIPS agreements and their dramatic medical consequences for years to come.

Today, certain countries of the South have the capacity to manufacture copies of antiretrovirals at much lower prices than those of the major producers. However, the political pressure that still surrounds the issues of intellectual property blocks the initiatives of the poor countries which want to produce or import copies of drugs – witness the action recently brought by the United States against Brazil at the WTO.

Only competition between different manufacturers will permit a drastic and durable decrease in the prices of pharmaceutical products - this dynamic of competition has already obliged Western manufacturers to align their prices with those of manufacturers of generics for a certain number of molecules.

Patients in developing countries should be able to benefit as soon as possible from the entire range of therapies against HIV/AIDS at cost. The urgency of treating the millions afflicted with AIDS in developing countries necessitates a rapid multiplication of sources of production in countries of the South and the development of South/South exchanges.

Thus, the breaches provided for by international agreements on intellectual property - compulsory licenses or parallel imports - as many parapets against the monopoly of major manufacturers, remain unexploitable given the current balance of power. Intimidation is the rule, and examples of aborted attempts abound.

Intellectual property rights should allow commercial exploitation of pharmaceutical products to generate reinvestment in research and ensure the broadest access to innovations in the health field. Actually, patents guarantee only one thing: profits for a few multinationals benefiting from a 20-year monopoly for the exploitation of drugs, while restricting access to patients who can afford them, the others depending on the sporadic charity of these multinationals.

Today, one of the priorities of the fight against AIDS is the launching of an international invitation to tender open to generics and copies manufacturers, allowing purchase of drugs at the lowest price through economies of scale and competition between manufacturers. The financing of such an operation does not require the creation of a "global and omnipotent" Fund, but a simple program within an existing organization.

Beyond this measure and since the WTO agreements seem unable to permit the defense of health interests, the fight against AIDS imposes the abolition of intellectual property everywhere where it kills.

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