Chairperson,

1. (Member State) delivers this statement on behalf of the 47 Member States of the Africa Region. We thank the Secretariat for this timely Information Session on the COVID-19/ New variant now called Omicron.

2. It has been 2 years since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, and as of 28 November, 2021, there were more than 5 million deaths that have been reported to the WHO. Member States have agreed that our response to the pandemic should be underpinned by the principles of global solidarity, equity, multilateralism, shared responsibility, mutual accountability and transparency.

3. Based on the available information, the new variant, was first identified in samples collected on the 11 November, in Botswana, and on the 14 November, in South Africa, during routine genomic surveillance of SARS-CoV-2, which was followed by immediate contact tracing. As of 30 November 2021, sequences of the variant Omicron have now been reported in all the WHO Regions, some of which have no connection of travel history in Southern Africa. We recall that in the context of a global pandemic, detecting and reporting of cases first, does not necessarily equate to origin.

4. Chairperson, Member States immediately following reporting of the new SARS-COV-2 variant, B.1.1.529 imposed travel and flight restrictions on several Southern African countries, including those
who have not even reported a single case of the new variant. We find this punitive approach to be disincentivising reporting and greatly undermines our collective action to end the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus far, it has been indicated that the Omicron is the most divergent variant that has been detected during the pandemic, which has led the WHO to declare it as a variant of concern. However, there are still many uncertainties, and the work is ongoing with the WHO working with the countries to determine the transmissibility, effect on the vaccines, case severity, and other characteristics.

5. The WHO and the Africa CDC have maintained that we follow a risk-based and scientific approach. Member States are required to implement the recommendations in line with the International Health Regulations (2005), and Member States to inform the WHO in the travel measures for its advice.

6. The COVID-19 response to be grounded in scientific, following transparent reporting for collective action and solidarity to end the pandemic. Member States should follow a proven public health and social measures such as wearing well-fitting masks, hand hygiene, physical distancing, improving ventilation of indoor spaces, avoiding crowded spaces, and getting vaccinated.

7. It is against this backdrop, Chairperson, that we wish to convey our disappointment in member states who have imposed the unjustified travel bans on our Region. In this view, the Africa Member States call for the immediate lifting of the imposition of travel bans for people originating from Southern African countries. We find these
travel bans discriminatory, in light of the fact that the same travel bans are not imposed on other parts of the world where the new variant has been identified.

8. The COVID-19 pandemic had placed significant burden our economies in particular in the Africa region where several Member States are going through a recession. The new flight and travel restrictions will continue to negatively affect our economies some of which were only starting to recover.

9. The Africa Member States as most developing countries have reiterated the need for vaccine equity. All the COVID-19 Review Committees indicated in their Reports to Member States the need to address Vaccine Equity. To date, about 90 million donated doses have been delivered to the continent via COVAX and AVAT and more via bilateral arrangements. However, the majority of the donations to-date have been ad hoc, provided with little notice and short shelf lives. This has made it extremely challenging for countries to plan vaccination campaigns and increase absorptive capacity. There is need for sharing of intellectual property and knowledge transfer and capacity building to scale up local and regional manufacturing of COVID-19 in this regard.

10. Chair, in conclusion, the Director General at the WHA Special Session indicated, .."when all of us are nothing but just photographs and memories; that we left the world a healthier safer and fairer place than we found". In this view history will judge us based on our actions of today.