

An international treaty on the fight against pandemics¹

This paper outlines how an international treaty on the fight against pandemics could help us improve how countries cooperate for our common well-being in response to future pandemics. This reflection is complementary to the independent evaluation of the international health response to COVID-19 pandemic and other review processes under way in the framework of the World Health Organisation. An international treaty on the fight against pandemics would be placed in the institutional framework of the World Health Organisation. As pandemics have multiple dimensions and consequences, the United Nations and more specifically the WHO should be at the centre of the process. Other relevant international organisations and agencies (WTO, OIE, FAO etc.) should be associated, taking into account existing relevant instruments.

Access to health as a global public good, science-based response and international solidarity are the principles which should shape our global action in fighting future pandemics.

An international treaty on the fight against pandemics would contribute to:

1.1. Better surveillance of pandemic risks

There is a need to strengthen our knowledge and monitoring of the new infectious diseases spreading from animals to humans that constitute one of the main health hazard for humanity. This could be achieved through the strengthening of laboratory and surveillance capacities required to identify animal diseases in all countries. It could also be explored how to pool knowledge by strengthening collaboration between research centres around the globe. More broadly, international funding for core capacities to detect potential pandemics in low-income countries should be better coordinated and international capacity to provide scientific advice strengthened.

1.2. Better research and development

The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated how critical it is for the scientific community to mobilise quickly and for the industry to be able to rapidly scale up their manufacturing capacity. Building on the experience gained with the ACT-Accelerator, support for research and development and possible upfront investing in manufacturing could be increased. Sharing of samples and genetic sequences could also support development of timely medical solutions.

1.3. Better alerts

Introducing more levels of alert commensurate to the degree of health threats would improve precision in communication about public health threats, thereby fostering transparency and legitimacy of restrictive or health-related measures.

1.4. Better response

For a better response, we need more resilient health systems around the globe. Essential health and other public services as well as global supply chains need to be resilient to pandemics. This could require more international funding for core health capacities in low-income countries and better assistance to countries in need, including through the training of health workers and deployment of equipment and international medical teams. To prevent disruptions in global supply chains, export restrictions for essential medical supplies should be avoided and tariffs and trade barriers on essential goods should be reduced or removed during pandemics. International corridors should enable safe return of stranded people and crew staff to their homes.

¹ This paper is intended as a basis for reflection. It is not meant to represent an official position of the institution.

1.5. Better compliance

Compliance could be enhanced through more robust country reporting, as well as more widespread use of joint external evaluations and ensuring their follow-up. Linking international funding to assessment of compliance with international rules could also be explored.

1.6. Better access to tests, medicines and vaccines

The experience gained with ACT-Accelerator could inspire future collective action to guarantee fair and equitable access for every country in the world to tests, medicines and vaccines. Voluntary pooling of intellectual property rights to accelerate the development of medical solutions could also be enhanced.

1.7. Better communication

Flow of trustworthy and accurate information should be increased and action to tackle misinformation and disinformation, in particular online, should be stepped up.

1.8. Better economic response and recovery

A common framework for greater support through the international financial institutions could improve coordination of the measures to counter the economic effects of pandemics, especially in low income developing countries. Stepping-up international technical assistance for the development of national response and recovery plans could also help in limiting the socio-economic consequences and accelerating the economic rebound.