

World could have prevented COVID catastrophe: pandemic panel

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The catastrophic scale of the COVID-19 pandemic could have been prevented, an independent global panel concluded Wednesday, but a "toxic cocktail" of dithering and poor coordination meant the warning signs went unheeded.

The Independent Panel for Pandemic Preparedness and Response said a series of bad decisions meant COVID-19 went on to kill more than 3.3 million people so far and devastate the global economy.

Institutions "failed to protect people" and science-denying leaders eroded public trust in [health interventions](#), the IPPPR said in its long-awaited [final report](#).

Early responses to the outbreak detected in Wuhan, China in December 2019 "lacked urgency", with February 2020 a costly "lost month" as countries failed to heed the alarm, said the panel.

To tackle the current [pandemic](#), it called on the richest countries to donate a billion vaccine doses

to the poorest.

And the panel also urged the world's wealthiest nations to fund new organisations dedicated to preparing for the next pandemic.

'Delay, hesitation and denial'

Requested by World Health Organization (WHO) member states last May, the report, "COVID-19: Make it the Last Pandemic", argued that the global alarm system needed overhauling to prevent a similar catastrophe.

"We have identified failures at every stage and we do believe that it could have been possible to prevent this pandemic," panel co-chair and former Liberian president Ellen Johnson Sirleaf said.

"We cannot simply point to one individual who is ultimately responsible," she said.

The report said the emergence of COVID-19 was characterised by a mixture of "some early and rapid action, but also by delay, hesitation, and denial.

"Poor strategic choices, unwillingness to tackle inequalities and an uncoordinated system created a toxic cocktail which allowed the pandemic to turn into a catastrophic human crisis."

The threat of a pandemic had been overlooked and countries were woefully unprepared to deal with one, the report found.

Sirleaf said: "The world had been warned that this would happen. This should never happen again. This must be the last pandemic to cause destruction on the scale we are witnessing today."

Vaccine ultimatum

The panel said the WHO could have declared the situation a Public Health Emergency of

International Concern (PHEIC)—its highest level of alarm—on January 22, 2020.

Instead, it waited eight more days before doing so.

Nevertheless, given countries' relative inaction, "we might still have ended up in the same place", said former New Zealand prime minister Helen Clark, the report's other chairwoman.

It was only in March after the WHO described it as a pandemic—a term that is not part of its alert system—that countries were jolted into action.

As for the initial outbreak, "there were clearly delays in China—but there were delays everywhere", she added.

In the near term, the panel said rich, well-vaccinated countries should provide the 92 poorest territories in the Covax scheme with at least one billion [vaccine doses](#) by September 1, and more than two billion by mid-2022.

G7 industrialised nations should pay 60 percent of the \$19 billion (\$15 billion euros) required to fund vaccines, diagnostics and therapeutics via the WHO's Access to COVID Tools Accelerator programme in 2021, it added.

Fellow G20 nations should provide the rest—and while Clark said there were positive signs emanating from the whole group, she added: "The end of the pandemic sadly is not in sight".

The WHO and the World Trade Organization should also get major vaccine-producing countries and manufacturers to agree voluntary licensing and technology transfers for COVID-19 vaccines, the panel said.

"If actions do not occur within three months, a waiver of... [intellectual property rights](#) should come into force immediately."

Invest billions, save trillions

To tackle future outbreaks and pandemics, the panel called for a Global Health Threats Council made up of world leaders, plus a pandemic

convention. The G20 should also create an International Pandemic Financing Facility, able to spend \$5-10 billion a year on preparedness, with \$50 to \$100 billion ready to roll in the event of a crisis.

"Ultimately, investing billions in preparedness now will save trillions in the future, as the current pandemic has so clearly illustrated," Clark told reporters.

"Do nations really want to go through all this again?" she asked.

The panel also proposed an overhaul of the WHO to make it less cautious and give it more authority to send expert missions into countries immediately without waiting for their approval.

WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said he would work with member states "to build a stronger WHO and a healthier, safer, fairer future for all of us".

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