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Why the world needs a strong WHO — and an international pandemic agreement

BY NICOLE HASSOUN AND KAUSHIK BASU, OPINION CONTRIBUTORS - 06/02/24 5:00 PM ET



World Health Organization (WHO) Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus (R) delivers his speech on the opening day of the 77th World Health Assembly, in Geneva on May 27, 2024. The WHO chief urged countries to nail down a landmark global agreement on handling of future pandemics after they missed a hard deadline. (Photo by Fabrice COFFRINI / AFP) (Photo by FABRICE COFFRINI/AFP via Getty Images)

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Senate Republicans have promised to reject a much-anticipated international pandemic agreement from the World Health Organization — an agreement among WHO members that would establish a road map, and legally binding policies, for the world’s nations to collectively and efficiently respond to the next global pandemic.

Such opposition, along with disagreements between members over financing nuts and bolts and equitable access to vaccines, has mired the final agreement in delays, just as the World Health Assembly gathers in Geneva.

Achieving global consensus on anything can seem next to impossible, but with the threat of emerging disease outbreaks looming, it is imperative that global cooperation trump nationalist attitudes.

In an open letter to President Biden, Republicans argued that the WHO response to the COVID-19 pandemic was a predictable and total failure that “did lasting harm to our country.” They are right that the global response was a predictable failure, but, for that reason, we need a *stronger* WHO and more robust pandemic agreement to avoid the devastating health and economic consequences of pandemics in the future.

Without a stronger WHO and a robust pandemic agreement, we risk a much worse pandemic next time. Future pandemics may easily kill 10 or even dozens of times as many people as COVID-19. Young adults, or even children, may be most at risk. They may also have much more devastating economic costs.

Under President Trump, the U.S. suspended contributions to the WHO and then started the process of withdrawing from the organization. The WHO provides vital supplies, training, and information, and can help coordinate pandemic preparation and response efforts across the globe. It is essential to strengthen the WHO to ensure that people everywhere can access the technologies they need to control pandemics in a timely fashion. Some estimate that there is a trillion-dollar vaccine gap.

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has the technologies and basic health systems they need to prevent and treat pandemic diseases when they first appear, rather than having to create them when a pandemic is declared.

While no [pandemic agreement will be perfect](#), a successful one must marshal funds to research and development for vaccines and other essential countermeasures and, even more critically, ensure that resulting products are accessed equitably across the globe. The international community should require companies to grant licenses, data and knowledge necessary to produce essential countermeasures to the WHO to ensure global access. That way the WHO can sublicense the technologies to manufacturers under strong access conditions.

If countries also commit to procuring these technologies collectively, they can recoup some of their investment costs for future research and development and invest in basic health systems. An effective agreement must also expand support for local health system development. Strong local health systems mean a resilient global health infrastructure.

Critics argue that the agreement will undermine national sovereignty and threaten individual freedom by dictating national policies and limiting free speech. But the agreement would actually protect our security and enhance our freedom. Real security requires preventing and addressing major pandemics quickly and effectively. Real freedom requires a unified response to pandemic threats. We need the capacity to roll out essential countermeasures much more quickly to save lives and avoid long lockdowns and huge economic costs.

At this critical moment, post-COVID-19, we have a chance to revamp our global health infrastructure. We can build on the lessons learned from previous pandemics and create a [more resilient and fair global health system](#) for the future. More comprehensive investments will ensure that all countries, regardless of income level, have fair access to the critical resources they need and can help the international community improve emergency response and address routine health care needs. We must make these investments now to prepare for the future.

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