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We need urgency and accountability in a Pandemic Treaty

GPHC Response to Conceptual Zero Draft

21 November 2022, London & Miami - As the world continues to battle waves of COVID-19, the growing geographic spread of Ebola is both concerning and another sobering reminder that stopping disease outbreaks quickly requires a cohesive system that involves global, regional, national and local stakeholders.

Last week, the intergovernmental negotiating body (INB), which is made up of World Health Organization (WHO) Member States working to draft and negotiate a pandemic treaty, published a “conceptual zero draft” for consideration at the INB’s third meeting in December. The Panel for a Global Public Health Convention (GPHC) welcomes the INB’s strong commitment to equity in this draft, though urges the INB to go further to include independent assessment for preparedness, as well as clear timelines for alert and response of health threats.

If the world had committed to equitable access to vaccines, tests, antivirals and personal protective equipment during the COVID-19 response in 2020, millions of lives and livelihoods would have been saved. Upholding the key principle to equity is also vital to ensuring countries operate on an equal playing field when it comes to setting preparedness targets. Common but specifically honed preparedness and response are needed based on a country’s starting point and the finances made available to them.

When it comes to assessing how well a country is prepared to stop a pathogen with pandemic potential, the Panel believes that peer review is a useful tool to learn from other countries, but it is not adequate for true accountability. Independent assessment by an autonomous body at arm’s length to the WHO is required for rigour, and to separate such efforts from the political dynamic which can and will take place when countries assess each other.

Finally, once an outbreak is detected, there are often a few critical hours to report, assess and act to stop the spread of a disease before it becomes virtually unstoppable. The current draft does not go far enough to call out the urgency needed to either prepare for disease X or known pathogens, or to respond at the early stage. From December 2019 when information about the new coronavirus was suppressed, to multiple countries taking a “wait and see” approach when COVID-19 cases were first reported, to the sluggish international response to a more mobile monkeypox virus, we’ve seen the damaging consequences of inaction at the onset.

As global health leaders convene to develop a zero draft of the pandemic treaty, we urge those involved to codify both accountability at all levels, including through independent assessment, as well as clear timelines for alert and response. We cannot continue the global cycle of crisis followed by complacency, especially when we have both painful lessons and a series of new tools to correct them.