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* PANDEMICS OPINION

Pandemic Preparedness: A Collective Responsibility for a Safer Future

INTERGENERATIONAL DIALOGUE

HELEN CLARK

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A COLLABORATION BETWEEN



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The
Elders

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This blog is co-authored by **Helen Clark** and **Inês Costa Louro**.

Inês is a medical doctor from Portugal serving on the Youth Reference Group of the UN Youth Office. She is also a representative in the EVID-ACTION Youth Network at the WHO Regional Office for Europe, and she was previously Vice President for External Affairs at the International Federation of Medical Students' Associations (IFMSA).

We come to this dialogue on pandemics from different backgrounds – one as a former Prime Minister and Co-Chair of the WHO Independent Panel for Pandemic Preparedness and Response, and the other as a recently graduated medical doctor who works closely with the WHO and experienced the COVID-19 pandemic as a young student. We both hold the same view that no one country, and no single generation, can tackle the challenges posed by pandemics alone — from inequitable access to medical countermeasures to the spread of disinformation and to economic damage. Pandemics pose a threat not only to our healthcare systems, but also to our wider societal levels of preparedness, resilience and solidarity. If these are weak, pandemics will have a more deadly impact. We discuss how the collective wisdom, innovation and action of people across all age groups can offer a path forward.

Moving Beyond Crisis Mode

When COVID-19 struck, the world scrambled to respond. Most countries implemented emergency measures, but many lacked the infrastructure, resources or plans to protect their populations effectively, and global coordination fell short. As a result, we saw overwhelmed health systems, preventable deaths, economic instability and deep social disruption.

As the immediate crisis faded, so did much of the urgency to address pandemic preparedness. The media moved on, much of the public was relieved to put the turmoil behind them, and global priorities shifted. But pandemics don't wait until we're ready — they can emerge at any time. We must keep momentum for reform alive, not only among policymakers and scientists, but also within communities, workplaces and everyday life. Everyone has a stake in this, and everyone must be well informed in order to keep the pressure on our governments to improve preparedness and response capacities.

Misinformation and disinformation thrived during COVID-19, creating confusion and undermining trust in public health measures. In a world buzzing with misinformation and disinformation, having the critical

FEATURED ELDERS



Helen Clark

Former Prime Minister of New Zealand and head of the UN Development Programme; Co-Chair of the WHO Independent Panel for Pandemic Preparedness and Response; an advocate for multilateralism and nuclear disarmament.

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awareness to discern fact from fiction is increasingly difficult. The next pandemic will bring the same challenges – probably on a larger scale – unless governments meet this challenge head-on.

We need governments and all global and national health bodies to ensure that accessible, science-based information is widely available, in languages and formats that people in all communities can understand and trust. Accurate public health information must reach people before misinformation does. Each age group is best placed to understand and address specific challenges facing its peers and know which communication channels are the most relevant to use.

Equity and Inclusion in Pandemic Response

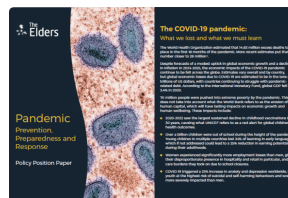
Stockpiling vaccines and medical supplies is not enough. Countries too often have focused their pandemic efforts on immediate containment and national interests rather than long-term systemic change. Governments must recognise that pandemics are an existential threat that pose a global challenge.

We've seen how pandemics disproportionately impact the most vulnerable populations and exacerbate preexisting inequalities. The disparity in access to vaccines and medical supplies during the COVID-19 pandemic was simply unconscionable. But the fact is that pandemics know no borders – an outbreak in New Zealand can have an impact in Portugal. If a country doesn't have the capacity to contain a virus, it becomes a risk to all countries. It is ultimately in all countries' self-interest to ensure equity and cooperation is built into global pandemic prevention, preparedness and response.

Each generation was impacted differently by COVID-19, and we must draw on this diversity of knowledge and experience to devise forward-thinking solutions. Ensuring that diverse voices are part of decision-making at every level isn't just about ensuring representation; it's about making decisions which serve the world better and leave no one behind.

A Call to Action

The COVID-19 pandemic may have subsided, but the risk of future health crises remains – with H5N1, Marburg and Mpox being current reminders of this reality. The difference between devastation and resilience will come down to the decisions leaders make today. Yet the responsibility for pandemic preparedness doesn't lie with leaders alone. Scientists, healthcare professionals, educators, civil society and each of us as individuals have a role to play.



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We call on policymakers to develop robust pandemic plans and actively engage young leaders in health governance. We urge institutions to invest in digital and community-driven solutions which bridge generational knowledge. We invite individuals of all ages to join this movement and push for stronger national pandemic plans, fight misinformation and advocate for global cooperation.

This is not just about the next pandemic. It is about creating a world where health security is a right, not a privilege. By working together across generations, sectors and disciplines, we can build a more resilient world – one that is ready for whatever comes next.

This piece is part of a collaborative dialogue between the United Nations Youth Office and The Elders, exploring the transformative power of intergenerational dialogue. This series aims to inspire action by highlighting real-world examples, amplifying diverse perspectives and fostering meaningful connections to lead to systemic change. Stay tuned for more discussions on working together to create a more just and sustainable world.



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