



By: Sharmila Devi

Viruses know no borders but nationalists cling to sovereignty over pandemic plans



Memories of the Covid years of lockdowns and restrictions are gradually fading despite the traumas suffered at the time. So it is not surprising that tortuous, multilateral negotiations in Geneva over a global treaty to prepare for the next pandemic have failed to command widespread attention.

Infectious pathogens know no borders. But that has not deterred rightwing populists from asserting that proposals to prepare the world ahead of the next health crisis, with a pandemic treaty for greater global collaboration, are an assault on national rights.

The UK's right-wing Reform party leader, Nigel Farage, is among those claiming the World Health Organisation (WHO) is seeking powers to impose lockdowns or vaccine mandates, prompting the UN body's chief to speak of "a torrent of fake news, lies and conspiracy theories".

The **failure** to agree a pandemic treaty at the World Health Assembly last month reflects many of the divisions that are preventing international consensus on other challenges, from global warming to the Ukraine war.

Even the potential threat from the still simmering bird flu situation failed to forge agreement. It has been found in at least 26 different kinds of mammals around the world. The first case of a human and fatal infection with H5N2, another strain of avian influenza, was identified in Mexico and reported by the WHO on 5 June.

Pandemic emergency

There is a "more difficult environment to find common solutions across countries because of the geopolitical situation," John-Arne Røttingen of the biomedical charity Wellcome Trust **told** the Financial Times. "West-east tension is increasing...and the pandemic has increased the divide between the [richer] north and [poorer] south."

Negotiators will meet again next month and WHO is bullish that its 194 member states will

agree by the end of this year a pandemic treaty requested by member states in 2021.

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Separately, countries meeting at the World Health Assembly did agree a deal to update legally-binding rules called International Health Regulations (IHR), including a new category of "pandemic emergency" for the most threatening health crises as well mechanisms for greater global collaboration on pathogen surveillance, information and response. IHR were last revised in 1995 and are binding on all member states.

The health talks "demonstrate a common desire by member states to protect their own people, and the world's, from the shared risk of public health emergencies and future pandemics," said WHO director-general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus.

Adding to its burden, the WHO was forced to deny claims spread by its critics that it wants a mandate to impose infection controls on countries, such as lockdowns and mask-wearing.

Opposition to pandemic treaty proposals

In the UK, Farage fronts a campaign group called Action on World Health. His ideological kin in the US include 24 Republican governors who **sent** a joint letter to President Joe Biden, saying the WHO would have "unconstitutional and unprecedented powers" over the US that would "undermine national sovereignty and infringe upon state rights".

The UK, which had joined the US in opposition to some of the pandemic treaty proposals,

acknowledged in a 2 June statement that it will be up to a new government to decide on adoption of the new IHR amendments.



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Given the opposition Labour party's poll lead, it will likely form the next government after 4 July elections and determine the UK's stance in the pandemic accord talks.

Health and civil society groups hope a pandemic treaty will prevent a repeat of the situation in which poorer countries were still waiting to receive their first COVID-19 vaccines while rich countries were giving booster shots to those already vaccinated.

Developing countries also worry they again might have to provide virus samples in a future pandemic while remaining unable to afford any treatment developed from them.

A draft of the accord proposed that WHO should get 20 per cent of pandemic tools such as tests, treatments and vaccines to distribute according to global needs but there were no mechanisms to penalise countries that did not comply.

The updated IHR did include the idea of a "coordinating financing mechanism" for countries to access health supplies based on public health needs.

The WHO was criticised during the Covid pandemic for being too slow to declare an emergency. Health experts welcomed a tiered system of alerts in the IHR in the hope they might save millions of deaths in the future.

They also call for a better system of pandemic travel restrictions. Many governments imposed them during Covid even after the virus had spread because electorates were broadly supportive even if they hampered humanitarian work around the world.

The number of government restrictions and conditions on cross-border mobility reached more than 100,000 by the end of 2020 and they remained in place for the first two years of the Covid pandemic, says a paper by the Migration Policy Initiative, a US think tank.

"Modelling has shown a 47-57 per cent chance of a pandemic as serious as COVID-19 occurring in the next 25 years" - Jean Kaseya

These "punitive and symbolic measures" had disproportionate effects on the world's most vulnerable people, it said.

Intellectual property rights also remain a divisive issue, with developing countries urging flexibility and funding support because the next pandemic may be looming.

"Modelling has shown a 47-57 per cent chance of a pandemic as serious as COVID-19 occurring in the next 25 years," wrote Jean Kaseya, director-general of the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention.

"A proposed pandemic agreement is much needed, but its form, content and structure should not perpetuate fragility and disparities across global health systems, particularly in Africa," he said.

Punitive and symbolic measures