

Towards a Safer Future: The Imperative of the New Pandemic Agreement

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As the dust settles from the global disruption of COVID-19, one lesson stands above all: no country can respond effectively in isolation. In a hope step forward, the World Health Organization (WHO) announced on April 16, 2025, that its Member States had concluded negotiations on a draft pandemic agreement. This marks a significant milestone in global health diplomacy and may well reshape how the world prepares for, and responds to, future outbreaks¹. The agreement has been in the making since late 2021, when countries recognized that the fragmented response to COVID-19 cost millions of lives and trillions of dollars. Nations have now produced a draft after 13 rounds of negotiations led by the Intergovernmental Negotiating Body that emphasizes equity, transparency, preparedness, and solidarity. While the document still awaits formal adoption at the World Health Assembly in May, the breakthrough signals that lessons from the past are finally may shape our future.¹

At the heart of the agreement is an essential commitment to equity. The COVID-19 pandemic laid bare the deep chasms in global healthcare access. High income countries secured early access to vaccines and medicines, while low- and middle-income countries waited in uncertainty. The draft agreement promises fairer systems for distributing vaccines, diagnostics, and therapeutics. It emphasizes technology transfer, local manufacturing, and resource-sharing, potentially narrowing the persistent divide between the Global North and South². Equally important is the focus on data sharing and transparency. Early detection is the first line of defense in a pandemic. Yet, national reluctance to report outbreaks sometimes due to

political or economic fears has previously delayed critical responses. The new agreement seeks to build mutual trust by encouraging real-time data sharing, while also ensuring that such data is handled with respect for privacy and national sovereignty.³

Beyond emergency responses, the draft outlines plan to strengthen public health systems around the world. Instead of merely reacting to threats, it proposes long-term investments in healthcare infrastructure, training, and universal health coverage. This shift reflects a growing recognition that true preparedness means resilience at every level from well-equipped hospitals to empowered frontline workers. However, while the agreement is ambitious, it's not without its critics. Primary concern is enforceability. Like many international instruments, the pandemic agreement lacks hard legal teeth. Its success depends heavily on countries voluntarily meeting their commitments. Legal experts warn that without strong compliance frameworks, there's a danger the agreement could end up as little more than symbolic.⁴

Additionally, geopolitical tensions remain a hurdle. The pandemic has heightened distrust between major global powers, particularly regarding vaccine diplomacy and supply chain control. Negotiators have worked to keep politics out of public health, but sustaining that balance will require ongoing goodwill and leadership. As Kickbusch et al. note, health security must be viewed not as a competition, but as a shared global responsibility⁵. Crucially, the public must not be left behind. Pandemic preparedness isn't only the business of states and international organizations. Trust, transparency, and meaningful engagement with civil society are essential. The COVID-19 crisis saw a flood of misinformation and public skepticism, often exacerbated by a lack of communication. If the pandemic agreement is to succeed, it must be accompanied by efforts to involve citizens in preparedness plans and response strategies.

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Still, despite these challenges, the draft pandemic agreement offers a framework that could finally align global ambition with action. As WHO Director-General Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus put it, “The nations of the world made history in Geneva today.” This is not just a document—it’s a statement that humanity can choose cooperation over chaos. Looking ahead to the World Health Assembly, leaders have an opportunity to enshrine this vision into reality. Adoption of the agreement would be a vital first step. But the real test lies in its implementation: translating promises into policies, and ideals into impact. That means sustained investment, political will, and accountability.

COVID-19 exposed the vulnerabilities of our global health system. The pandemic agreement could be the foundation of something stronger once allowed it to be. This is a rare opportunity for the world to act not panic, but with foresight. Let us not squander it.

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