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Covid-19: WHO and China acted too slowly in early days of pandemic, says report

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The World Health Organization was slow to act when SARS-CoV-2 emerged and should have declared a pandemic sooner to ensure countries understood the gravity of the situation, a panel of experts has concluded.¹

The Independent Panel for Pandemic Preparedness and Response was established by WHO to review the international health response to covid-19. In its report, published 19 January, the panel said the global pandemic alert system is “not fit for purpose,” with critical elements deemed “slow, cumbersome, and indecisive.”

It said the system needs updating to bring it into the digital era, but that this must be accompanied by a “political step change in the willingness of countries to hold themselves accountable for taking all necessary actions as soon as an alert is given.”

The panel’s report, which has been informed by hundreds of documents and expert interviews, said it’s not clear why the WHO emergency committee waited until 22 January 2020 to meet or why it was unable to declare a public health emergency of international concern at that first meeting. It then questioned whether “it would have helped if WHO had used the word pandemic earlier than it did.”

Looking at the response in China, the experts said that public health measures should have been applied “more forcefully by local and national health authorities” in January.

They also went on to criticise many other countries for not rolling out non-pharmaceutical interventions—such as contact tracing, physical distancing, limits on travel and gathering, and mask wearing. “In too many countries, the failure to apply such measures is continuing to result in an unacceptable toll of death, illness, and transmission,” it said.

The panel, co-chaired by former prime minister of New Zealand Helen Clark and former president of Liberia Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, said, “The system has struggled to meet the challenge of the pandemic. Global leadership has been exercised weakly. There has been greater reliance than ever before on WHO, and there have been major new needs in relation to coordinated supply, accelerated development of vaccines and other countermeasures, and rapidly deployable financing.”

The panel pointed to several weaknesses in the response, including the absence of effective frameworks to ensure equitable access to supplies, leading to poor stockpiling, over-reliance on single sources, hoarding, and logistical problems. Additionally, it called for real time data gathering and decision making tools, to enable action to be taken more quickly.

“When there is a potential health threat, countries and WHO must further use the digital tools at their disposal to keep pace with news that spreads instantly on social media and infectious pathogens that spread rapidly through travel,” said Clark. “Detection and alert may have been speedy by the standards of earlier novel pathogens, but viruses move in minutes and hours, rather than in days and weeks.”

The panel has said this pandemic “must be a catalyst for fundamental and systemic change in preparedness for future such events.” It will set out recommendations for the future in a report expected in May.

¹ Independent Panel for Pandemic Preparedness and Response for the WHO Executive Board. Second report on progress. January 2021. https://theindependent-panel.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Independent-Panel_Second-Report-on-Progress_Final-15-Jan-2021.pdf.