Covid-19: Funding for pandemic preparedness being “sucked away” by war in Ukraine

Paul Dinsdale

A funding gap of around £10.5bn (€12bn; $12.4bn) for pandemic preparedness in developing countries has emerged as governments in richer countries divert finance to military aid for Ukraine and other urgent domestic priorities, a conference on development finance has been told.

Mark Malloch Brown, former UN deputy director general and now president of the development charity Open Society Foundations, said that funding for another pandemic in poorer countries was being “sucked away” by funding for Ukraine since Russia’s invasion of the country, and pledges on development aid generally were not being kept.

The UK had reduced its funding for development aid from 0.7% of GDP to 0.5%, and commitments from other countries were “falling away,” he said. The reconstruction of Ukraine could cost around £350bn over the next 10 years, which will also require huge amounts of aid.

Many European governments also face increased spending on subsidising their populations as energy costs rise and to support Ukrainian refugees taken in by their countries, which will affect finance available for pandemic preparedness.

At the conference on the future of development finance last week in London, organised by Devex, a non-profit umbrella group for development charities, Malloch Brown also expressed concern that the drug industry could exert more pressure on developing countries in their planning for future pandemics.

“I worry a lot about big pharma extending its grip on the framework of pandemic preparedness. The development of covid-19 vaccines was a real success, but it must be set within a regulatory framework which addresses issues of access and pricing and universal availability, and that needs strong regulation,” he said.

“We cannot repeat the injustice of covid-19, which not only had a public health cost but has had a massive political cost that we’re still living with and that has fuelled a whole new level of distrust of the global north in developing countries.”

WHO has had to start rationing cholera vaccines in developing countries as the supply is not sufficient for all outlets that need it, and TB, which is the next biggest killer disease after covid-19, is currently classed as a pandemic as well,” he said.

Peter Baker, assistant director of the Centre for Global Development, said that there was a need for global monitoring of covid-19 and stockpiling of vaccines but there was an urgent need to improve primary healthcare in many countries and that the “bulk of the funding needs to go to locally led campaigns.”

Fifa Rahman, a representative of WHO’s ACT accelerator and a special adviser at Health Poverty Action, said there was a shortage of community health workers in many developing countries and that national strategies required more health workers at grassroots level to get “jabs in arms.”