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WHO pandemic treaty: “Torrent of fake news” has put negotiations at risk, says WHO chief

Luke Taylor

Negotiations of an international treaty intended to prepare for and prevent future pandemics are in danger of falling apart as misinformation fuels opposition to the initiative, senior World Health Organization officials said last week.

WHO’s 194 member states agreed in December 2021 to draw up a new international convention to ensure that the world would be prepared for future global health threats and to prevent the “catastrophic failure” seen during the covid pandemic.¹

WHO said that negotiations have advanced significantly in the past two years but some of the most crucial and contentious stipulations of the accord are yet to be agreed. Global health experts had hoped that the treaty would be signed off at the 2024 World Health Assembly in late May but this timeline could be unrealistic.

“When covid-19 struck, we acted with urgency. We found new ways of working together. We did this because we had to,” WHO director general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus told the assembly. “We need that same sense of urgency now.”

WHO has not published a significant update on the negotiations since October 2023 when it published the latest draft.² The lack of new information shared with the public makes it hard to understand how much negotiations have advanced, which commitments remain in the accord, and whether WHO can push the internationally binding agreement over the line for May.

Global health experts are concerned that stipulations deemed key to preventing future pandemic disasters, such as the obligation to share information in order to detect novel pathogens early on, could be watered down or stripped entirely.

International pharmaceutical companies have been critical of the obligation for countries to waive the exclusive rights to produce jabs so that vaccines can be produced in low and middle income countries more rapidly.³

Nina Schwalbe, public health researcher and founder of the public health think tank Spark Street Advisors, told *The BMJ*, “There has been no demonstrable progress on any of the problems areas—from access and benefit sharing to equity, intellectual property, and financing. All the matters that have been sticky from the beginning are still sticky and the way forward is unclear. It’s a tough road ahead.”

WHO officials blamed conspiracy theories for mobilising public opposition to the accord and hindering negotiations. Social media is awash with what Tedros described as a “a torrent of fake news, lies, and conspiracy theories.”

Among the false claims are that the pandemic treaty plans to snatch sovereignty from countries by imposing lockdowns or vaccine mandates. “This is fake news, lies, and conspiracy theories. Negotiating members know that the agreement will give WHO no such powers, because you are writing it,” Tedros said.

The obstacle lies less with disinformation than with world leaders who have shown a lack of commitment to the accord, including not attending high level discussions on the pact, Schwalbe said. “There is a genuine lack of political will,” she told *The BMJ*.

Member nations have become too “entrenched” in their positions and their unwillingness to compromise could halt the only chance the world has to forge a new agreement that could prevent another global health disaster. “This is a generational opportunity that we must not miss,” Tedros said. “We must be bold and we must be creative to overcome hurdles, entrenched positions, and old ways of thinking.”

- 1 Taylor L. Covid-19: WHO treaty hopes to overcome “catastrophic failures” of pandemic response. *BMJ* 2023;380. doi: 10.1136/bmj.p357 pmid: 36787907
- 2 Draft Pandemic Accord. IP waivers and benefits for sharing pathogen information are in—for now. Health Policy Watch. <http://healthpolicywatch.org/2023/12/14/draft-pandemic-accord-ip-waivers-and-benefits-for-sharing-pathogen-information-for-now/>
- 3 Taylor L. WHO pandemic treaty: Negotiations falter as pharma companies warn that intellectual property rules will harm profits. *BMJ* 2023;383. doi: 10.1136/bmj.p2475 pmid: 37879727