



## Preventing the Next Pandemic: The Power of a Global Viral Surveillance Network

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# Preventing the Next Pandemic: The Power of a Global Viral Surveillance Network

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## Introduction

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare our collective weaknesses in being able to effectively respond to the emergence of a highly contagious and lethal microbial threat.

Despite extraordinary advances over the past century in science and unprecedented improvement in global health standards, as evidenced by the COVID-19 pandemic, we still live in a world where the threat of an infectious agent can emerge anytime and any place without warning and spread rapidly to every community and every household without regard to national borders.

Importantly, COVID-19 is not the first pandemic of this century and is unlikely to be the last.

Over the last 20 years a number of high impact epidemics and pandemics have emerged or reemerged. In this short period of time, we have had emergence of three new coronaviruses (CoV), namely Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in 2003; Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) in 2012; and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic caused by SARS-CoV-2, a number of highly pathogenic influenza A viruses (e.g. H5N1 in 2003; H7N9 in 2013; and the H1N1 pandemic of 2009), the Zika virus as a global health emergency in 2016, and the continuing rise and spread of Ebola in West and Central Africa since 2013. All these epidemic and pandemic viruses have jumped from wild animals, either directly into humans or indirectly through domestic animals. Once they have made the inter-species jump, they tend to persist and evolve in the human systems presenting a continuous danger to the global community.

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6 Over the course of the remainder of this century, the likely frequency of epidemics and  
7  
8 pandemics will continue to increase, driven to a large extent by demographic trends, including  
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10 urbanization, and environmental degradation, climate change, persistent social and economic  
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12 inequalities, and globalized trade and travel (1,2,3). The burden of these diseases is not equally  
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14 distributed across the world; the economically disenfranchised, displaced populations and  
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16 people living with pre-existing conditions are disproportionately impacted (4).  
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23 Importantly, the drivers underlying the emergence of novel disease threats are complex human  
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25 behaviors and their impact on animal populations and the environment<sup>5</sup>. Changing  
26  
27 environmental and climatic conditions have been closely linked to the emergence of novel  
28  
29 infectious diseases and the redistribution of those already existing (6,7). Their aggregate impact  
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31 will continue to increase.  
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38 While the upgrading of the health security apparatus over the last decade has been welcomed,  
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40 COVID-19 underscores that these processes and institutional arrangements are not sufficient to  
41  
42 responding to events such as those caused by SARS-COV-2. Compliance with the International  
43  
44 Health Regulations (8), that provide a normative framework for surveillance, preparedness,  
45  
46 notification and international support and coordination has also been shown to be inadequate.  
47  
48 The experience of the COVID-19 pandemic, yet again underscores that new efforts need to be  
49  
50 made to craft global strategies, policies and regulatory frameworks that more directly address  
51  
52 the multi-sectoral aspects of disease emergence in order to improve our collective capacities to  
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3 prevent, as well as rapidly detect and respond to threats. Key is building a global surveillance  
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5 system spanning wildlife, livestock and human populations that is able through the collection of  
6  
7 detailed meta-data to identify geographic “hot spots” where the risk of spill-over into human  
8  
9 and livestock populations is greatest, and to use this detailed understanding of “risk” to target  
10  
11 surveillance to those places for the early detection of spillover events in humans and livestock  
12  
13 at a local level. Further, understanding where the threat of spillover is greatest allows for the  
14  
15 targeting of pre-emptive measures to disrupt spillovers. Current efforts to address pandemics  
16  
17 after they have emerged, through the traditional approaches such as quarantine, and drug and  
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19 vaccine development are woefully inadequate to contain a raging pandemic such as COVID-19.  
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27 Jones et al<sup>7</sup> created the first hot-spot maps based on comprehensive literature review of all  
28  
29 emerging and re-emerging infectious diseases in the last 60 years. This map was recently  
30  
31 updated (9). It shows that the tropical regions of Africa, Asia and South America are still  
32  
33 represented as high-risk ecological locations for majority of the zoonotic pathogens. These are  
34  
35 also the regions where the wildlife biodiversity is rich and the land use changes are  
36  
37 accelerating. These regions are likely to be most cost-effective for surveillance at the  
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39 intersection of wildlife, livestock and humans.  
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47 There are a huge number of pathogens globally, and given limited resources to address these,  
48  
49 World Health Organization (WHO) (10) under their Research and Development Blueprint  
50  
51 developed a first list of priority pathogens that have the greatest public health risks. This list  
52  
53 was updated in 2020 and includes members of the families of coronaviridae (SARS-CoV 1, SARS-  
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3 CoV-2 and MERS CoV), filoviridae (Ebola and Marburg), flaviviridae (Zika), paramyxoviridae  
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5 (Nipah, Henipa), arenaviridae (Lassa), bunyaviridae (Crimean-Congo haemorrhagic fever) and  
6  
7 phenuviridae (Rift Valley fever) and “Disease X”. The Centres for Disease Control (CDC) (11), in  
8  
9 their list of priority diseases includes zoonotic influenzas as their top priority zoonotic viral  
10  
11 disease as they continue to persist and evolve generating new phenotypes in livestock  
12  
13 production sectors, particularly in Asia and Africa. The “Disease X” referred to in the WHO list  
14  
15 represents a disease caused by a pathogen as yet unknown to humans but may cause a serious  
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17 international health crisis. There are tens of thousands of such zoonotic viruses that are yet to  
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19 be discovered (12).  
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### 28 **Creating a Global Viral Surveillance Atlas**

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30 In 2018 two papers were published (12,13) that proposed the Global Virome Project (GVP)  
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32 that had a bold and ambitious global-scale ‘big science’ plan to develop an atlas of the majority of  
33  
34 the planet’s naturally-occurring zoonotic viral threats over a 10 year time frame, transforming  
35  
36 the world of emerging diseases into a data-rich field. The GVP was established as a legal non-  
37  
38 governmental entity in early 2020 with a planned launch of field operations in 2021. The vision  
39  
40 behind the GVP is that if we develop a comprehensive profile of viruses while they are  
41  
42 circulating in wildlife – their natural hosts – we can better prevent, detect, and respond to  
43  
44 viruses as they jump to us and before they begin to transmit among human population. The  
45  
46 expectation is that the GVP will transform our public health culture from one that responds to  
47  
48 the latest outbreak, to one that is better able prevent their emergence and spread among  
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50 human and livestock populations, detect spillover events early when they do occur, respond  
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3 quickly to preempt their spread and support the scientific community in generating far more  
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5 effectively biomedical countermeasures to respond to future outbreaks should they occur.  
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8 This power to “prevent, detect, and respond” will protect against not only human infections but  
9  
10 similarly protect domesticated animal populations which share our vulnerability to emerging  
11  
12 viral threats, and by extension protect against the devastating effects of viral threats such as  
13  
14 the recent emergence of the zoonotic H5N1 highly pathogenic avian influenza, and recent  
15  
16 incursion and spread of African Swine fever in Asia causing serious concerns of food security  
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18 and livelihoods of poor farming communities of the world (14,15,16,17).  
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25 At the heart of the GVP is an open and transparent data portal that will manage the array of  
26  
27 data generated – and enable the building of a comprehensive Global Viral Atlas, enhanced by a  
28  
29 large set of meta-data and a growing collection of new zoonotic viruses for further research.  
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### 35 **The Need for a Global Viral Surveillance Network**

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37 While the GVP will contribute to a dramatic expansion of what is known about viruses circulating  
38  
39 in wildlife and enable the identification of future viral threats *before* they emerge – these “big  
40  
41 data” will by virtue of GVP’s 10 year temporal boundaries, represent a “snap shot in time” – that  
42  
43 provide a specific point in time data-set spanning viral genetics and ecology. What will be true  
44  
45 of these “high risk” viruses is that they will, over time, continue to evolve – acquiring new  
46  
47 genetic features, diversifying their distribution across animal species – and in effect evolving  
48  
49 their risk profile (18). The initial data generated by the GVP will contribute critical insight into  
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3 establishing a “viral watch list” composed of those viruses circulating in wild life that possess the  
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5 most significant threat to human and animal populations.  
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10 The GVP will make substantive contributions to enhancing the multi-sectoral capacities across  
11  
12 countries for the collection and analysis of viral samples from the across wildlife (and under  
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14 certain circumstance livestock and humans) and provide a baseline against which to monitor  
15  
16 their evolution over time. What the GVP will not do is sustain the kind of long-term surveillance  
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18 that will be needed to monitor the critical biological and ecological changes among the “watch  
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20 list” that could signal elevated risk to human and animal health.  
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28 Though time-limited, the GVP is laying the groundwork for a longitudinal, multi-sectoral global  
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30 surveillance system to detect early spillover events, track and monitor the evolution of the viral  
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32 “watch list”. While information and knowledge about hundreds of thousand of yet undiscovered  
33  
34 viruses is essential, it is only a piece of a complex multifactorial reality. What is needed is a  
35  
36 comprehensive surveillance system that will build on the country-level capacities developed by  
37  
38 GVP and use the “watch list” to track genetic and ecologic evolution over time. This system  
39  
40 should also look at the human side of the equation. Among the millions of viruses present in  
41  
42 nature, only very few have the capacity to infect humans and even fewer have the capacity to  
43  
44 spread. However, even if the likelihood of an effective spill over is very low, the impact can be  
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46 disastrous and therefore specific investment in systems that can prevent such events is justified.  
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52 Many of the epidemics with pandemic potential were discovered early through an unusual  
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54 cluster of severe cases or deaths in humans. This is a weak signal, and is often missed by the  
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3 classical surveillance systems. In the future to improve our capacity to detect early viruses with  
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5 pandemic potential, it also critical to strengthen further the global capacity to pick-up unusual  
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7 clusters of severe morbidities and mortalities for further investigation and response. This can be  
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9 achieved by dual strategy of strengthening the existing health care systems and improving the  
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11 surveillance and diagnostic capacities to detect above-mentioned viral watch list in hot spot  
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13 regions. Such a multi-sectoral system will contribute to an enhanced capacity to forecast future  
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15 threats and enable early intervention before they pose a threat.  
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### 23 **Examples of Viral Surveillance Exist but Need to Be Broadened**

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25 There is precedent for establishing a global scope for the longitudinal monitoring of a select  
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27 pathogen. WHO's Global Influenza Surveillance and Response System (GISRS) for more than  
28  
29 half a century has been tasked with monitoring the evolution of influenza viruses for  
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31 development of the annual influenza vaccine, as well as serving as a global alert mechanism for  
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33 the emergence of influenza viruses with pandemic potential (19). The GISRS has grown into a  
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35 global partnership of 143 National Influenza Centers (NICs), 6 highly specialized Collaborating  
36  
37 Centres for Reference and Research on Influenza and 4 national licensing agencies or Essential  
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39 Regulatory Laboratories and 13 H5 Reference Laboratories. The NICs collect, identify and ana-  
40  
41 lyze influenza strains isolated from clinical specimens and forward representative or unusual  
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43 virus isolates to a WHO Collaborating Centres for detailed characterization. Although  
44  
45 individual-level epidemiological or clinical data are not collected, NICs provide weekly reports  
46  
47 to WHO of geographically-based influenza like activity using FluNet, a web-based electronic  
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49 interactive data reporting, query and mapping system (20). The network over 65 years has  
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3 provided information on circulating seasonal influenza viruses, as well as supporting response  
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5 to the influenza pandemics in 1957, 1968, and 2009, and to threats caused by animal influenza  
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7 viruses and by zoonotic transmission of coronaviruses.  
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11 Before the H1N1 2009 pandemic, WHO developed FluID, which is a global platform for data  
12  
13 sharing that links regional influenza epidemiological data into a single global database  
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15 ([https://www.who.int/influenza/surveillance\\_monitoring/fluid/en/](https://www.who.int/influenza/surveillance_monitoring/fluid/en/)) to monitor the influenza  
16  
17 disease. It complements FLuNet by providing critical information of the impact of the viruses on  
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19 human health.  
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25 The 2009 H1N1 pandemic showed that only monitoring for viruses does not provide adequate  
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27 information for decision makers to respond to and mitigate the health impacts of an epidemic.  
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29 Information on the severity of the disease and the real time impact on populations health is  
30  
31 essential. After the 2009 H1N1 pandemic most of the influenza surveillance systems in the  
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33 world started to include surveillance for respiratory symptoms with standardized case  
34  
35 definitions for Influenza Like Illnesses (ILI) and Severe Acute Respiratory Influenza (SARI), and  
36  
37 real time modelling into the existing viral surveillance. Similarly, OFFLU, the World Organization  
38  
39 for Animal Health (OIE)/Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) Animal Influenza Surveillance  
40  
41 platform, established in 2005 to interface with the existing WHO influenza network (21)  
42  
43 routinely shares as well as promotes the collection, exchange and characterization of animal  
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45 influenza viruses, including selection of viruses for seasonal influenza and deposition of  
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47 sequence data in genome banks.  
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3 GISRS and OFFLU are excellent examples of a robust global longitudinal surveillance system,  
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5 however, they are focused on influenzas. While it is important to maintain these surveillance  
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7 systems, forging the alliances essential for sustaining a multi-dimensional data base that  
8  
9 encompasses virtually all zoonotic viral families and spans the wildlife-livestock-human  
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11 ecosystems will require an order of magnitude higher level of political and institutional  
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13 commitments of the key international stakeholders, in particular WHO, FAO and OIE, and a buy-  
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15 in from their membership and the global development partners.  
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21 Fortunately, WHO, FAO and OIE, recognizing the need for enhanced multisectoral collaboration  
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23 for effective strategies for improving national, regional and community level pandemic  
24  
25 preparedness and response, have been strengthening their partnerships over the past decade  
26  
27 through a formal tripartite agreement (22). Recently, this agreement was further strengthened  
28  
29 through a Memorandum of Understanding (23) to set up joint action to combat health threats  
30  
31 emerging from interactions between humans, animals and the environment.  
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37 One example of a formalized monitoring and reporting platform for disease events involving  
38  
39 the WHO, FAO and OIE is the Global Early Warning and Response System (GLEWS). Established  
40  
41 in 2006, it aims to combine the strengths of three organizations to enhance a public and animal  
42  
43 health early warning system intended to reduce incidence and impacts of emerging infectious  
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45 diseases in animals and humans (24). Partners in GLEWS, which incorporates both animal and  
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47 public health sectors, share information from all over the world on disease outbreaks in real  
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49 time, conduct rapid cross-sectoral risk assessments, evaluate control and prevention options,  
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51 and coordinate their responses.  
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6 GLEWS combines and coordinates the alert and response mechanisms of the OIE, FAO, and  
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8 WHO to assist in prediction, prevention, and control of emerging infectious diseases. This  
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10 international platform is among the most effective means by which these agencies currently  
11  
12 collaborate. The scope of GLEWS, however, is focused on early detection of ongoing outbreaks  
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14 and does not address monitoring for and detection of emerging pathogens in animals and  
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16 humans before outbreaks occur, or support the “pre-event” surveillance of viruses in wildlife  
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18 population enabled by the GVP.  
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### 25 **The Time for Building a Sustained, Multi-sectoral Global Viral Surveillance Network is Now**

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27 While GISRS offers an important model for a longitudinal monitoring platform with its global  
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29 network of National Influenza Centers and Collaborating Centers, the “watch list” of a large  
30  
31 number of new viruses being generated by the GVP will necessitate an expanded scope – from a  
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33 focus on one viral family to the inclusion of all zoonotic viral families characterized as “high risk”.  
34  
35 In addition, a multi-sectoral partnership, much more like GLEWS, will be needed to ensure the  
36  
37 systems and capacities are able to track the evolution of these viruses as they spill over from  
38  
39 wildlife into livestock and humans. The GVP over its 10 year life will make critical investments in  
40  
41 building such multi-sectoral surveillance capacities at national, regional and global level as it  
42  
43 captures the initial “baseline” data (11). Sustaining such an effort, however, will require an  
44  
45 expanded partnership across WHO, FAO and OIE and their national constituencies and regional  
46  
47 economic communities to the long-term monitoring of genetic, epidemiologic and ecologic  
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49 changes that signal the potential emergence of a new viral threat. Equally important will be  
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3 sustaining and broadening the open and transparent data platform established by the GVP; and,  
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5 that like GISRS and GLEWS this data will be the basis for further risk analysis, targeted  
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7 surveillance in humans and livestock, forecasting disease emergence, and effective response and  
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9 prevention.  
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15 Nearly all the surveillance systems that currently exist are very much event based, or syndromic  
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17 in nature. Most pathogens that are identified are from outbreaks. Apart from GISRS, all other  
18  
19 multi-sectoral collaborations are focused on disease information sharing through their  
20  
21 respective networks and country offices. There is no formal system that is in place in any country  
22  
23 that routinely conducts active viral surveillance combined with rapid clinical assessment for a list  
24  
25 of priority emerging and re-emerging viral diseases. Identifying viral spillover events from  
26  
27 wildlife to livestock and humans, well before they manifest in localised outbreaks, is a pre-  
28  
29 requisite for pre-empting high consequence epidemics and pandemics. While such an approach  
30  
31 under a global coordination mechanism has never been attempted before, given the frequency  
32  
33 with which new epidemics and pandemics are now emerging, this approach necessitates further  
34  
35 discussion and investment. Given the magnitude of the dual, health and socio-economic impact  
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37 of current COVID-19 crisis, the benefits of such an approach can be easily justified.  
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47 Introduction of a formalized and sustained, longitudinal surveillance for detection of spill-over  
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49 events at the interface of wild and domestic animals and humans of priority viruses in pre-  
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51 defined hot-spot regions of the world is not without significant challenges. This approach is  
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53 fundamentally different in scope and scale from syndromic, passive surveillance and require  
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3 sustainable investment at the interface of multiple sectors. Dealing with high impact emerging  
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5 and re-emerging infectious diseases is of international public good (25) and hence will require a  
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7 strong buy-in and financing from national public, animal and environmental sectors, with  
8  
9 support from UN technical agencies (e.g. WHO, FAO and OIE), as well as numerous bilateral  
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11 donors, multi-lateral development partners and Foundations (e.g. United States Agency for  
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13 International Development, Department for International Development of UK, the European  
14  
15 Union, World Bank and Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation). The technical challenges in  
16  
17 designing sampling frames, availability of trained human resource, infrastructural support for  
18  
19 joint public health and animal health collection of biological samples, transportation and  
20  
21 laboratory testing in target countries are complex. In addition, mechanism of sharing  
22  
23 information for rare spillover events that may occur in distant and remote places at evolving  
24  
25 interfaces, and in dynamic livestock and wild animal production systems and their value chains,  
26  
27 driven by a complex set of factors such as climate change, land use and demographic changes  
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29 cannot be under-estimated. Challenges of handling large volumes of data, standardization,  
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31 establishment of databases, multi-dimensional data analysis, and regulatory and legislative  
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33 framework for sharing information pose significant challenges.  
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45 Coordination among the United Nations and other international agencies, together with relevant  
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47 national and regional partners and financing institutions is needed urgently to discuss and plan  
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49 such a global venture and to develop a shared vision leading to a formal agreement on the  
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51 principle of the establishment of an active, targeted global, innovative one health surveillance  
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3 programme as an essential basis for preventing future pandemics. Technical, policy and  
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5 regulatory framework can then be coordinated under the aegis of the FAO-OIE-WHO 'tripartite'.  
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10 The products of GVP will offer a unique opportunity to the global community for the first time in  
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12 providing information on the precise geographical location of the new high-risk viruses that are  
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14 being detected. New virus discovery will enable generation of multiplex diagnostic platforms  
15  
16 with appropriate pathogen specific molecular primers and probes for rapid and affordable  
17  
18 detection of these viruses through active virological surveillance. In addition, rapidly evolving  
19  
20 next generation or 'deep' DNA sequencing technologies and real time digital pathogen  
21  
22 surveillance allow a generic approach (non-specific method) to virus identification that does not  
23  
24 require *a priori* knowledge on the targeted pathogens but can deliver a species/strain specific  
25  
26 result (26,27). Combining these technologies with associated bioinformatics tools can greatly  
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28 enhance the power of active viral surveillance programme for early spill over events of novel  
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30 viruses from wild life to domestic animals and humans.  
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39 The time for establishing such a long-term surveillance platform is not, however, at the end of  
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41 the GVP's ten-year lifespan. The projected discovery curves under the GVP for new viral threats  
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43 will be rapid (11). By year three of the GVP tens of thousands of new viruses are projected to  
44  
45 have been identified and the first "viral watch-lists" will have been generated. Given the time  
46  
47 sensitivity of the "baseline data" there will be an urgent need to begin the immediate  
48  
49 monitoring of this "list". Current plans for the GVP have the first phase of its launch beginning  
50  
51 in 2021– a two year "incubation period" in a limited number of "start up" countries to test the  
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53 ability of the GVP to go to operational scale (both sampling and data management). The full  
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3 scale 10 year “steady-state” phase of the GVP will begin in 2023– with an expected rapid  
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5 generation of viral data. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the worst since the influenza  
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7 pandemic 100 years ago, has heightened the sensitivity of the global community to devastating  
8  
9 socio-political and economic damage to the planet. This is a significant opportunity to initiate a  
10  
11 high-level dialogue to embark on how to formalize and support a sustainable global surveillance  
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13 system for emerging pathogens to avert future epidemics and pandemics that continue to  
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15 emerge and re-emerge at increasing frequency from wild animals.  
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23 The global community has an opportunity over the next three years to partner with and build on  
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25 the knowledge and information that will be generated by the GVP to early detect and prevent  
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27 pandemics through longitudinal tracking of high risk viral threats –and realize the promise of the  
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29 GVP to make the world safer and better able to prevent the next pandemic.  
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35 Ultimately, multi-pronged approaches are needed to address the challenges of mitigating the  
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37 impacts of epidemics and pandemics of new viruses originating from wild animals. These should  
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39 include harnessing the large volume of new meta-data generated through the GVP and the  
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41 proposed longitudinal viral surveillance programmes to address the root causes of spill-overs  
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43 and spread of new pathogens, addressing risky practices, improving livestock food systems, and  
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45 in parallel continue significant investments in the development of innovative diagnostic, vaccines  
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47 (28) and chemotherapeutics.  
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**Abbreviations**

CDC: Centres for Disease Control, CoV: Coronavirus; COVID-19: Coronavirus Disease; FAO: Food and Agriculture Organization; GISR: Global Influenza Surveillance; GLEWS: Global Early Warning System; GVP: Global Virome Project; HPAI: Highly Pathogenic Influenza; ILI: Influenza like Illnesses; MERS: Middle East Respiratory Syndrome; OFFLU: OIE/FAO; OIE: The World Organization for Animal Health; SARI: Severe Acute Respiratory Infections; SARS: Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome; WHO: World Health Organization

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Dennis Carroll: Developed the original concept, designed the outline of the paper, and generated the first draft. Subhash Morzaria, Sylvie Briand, Christine Kreuder Johnson, David Morens, Helen Semedo, Oyewale Tomori and Supaporn Wacharphaueasadee reviewed the draft manuscript, made critical intellectual inputs, and suggested changes to the concept and design of the paper. Dennis Carroll and Subhash Morzaria: Coordinated the writing of the entire manuscript. The authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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