



European Council
Council of the European Union

An international treaty on pandemic prevention and preparedness

Why an international treaty

The COVID-19 pandemic is a global challenge. No single government or institution can address the threat of future pandemics alone.

A treaty is a legally binding instrument under international law. An international treaty on pandemics adopted under the World Health Organization (WHO) would enable countries around the globe to strengthen national, regional and global capacities and resilience to future pandemics.

Objectives

The proposal for a treaty is guided by a spirit of collective solidarity, anchored in the principles of fairness, inclusiveness and transparency.

Neither individual governments nor the global community can entirely prevent pandemics. But the international community needs to be much better prepared and better aligned in responding to possible future pandemics across the entire cycle of detection, alarm and response.

The treaty would set out the objectives and fundamental principles in order to structure the necessary collective action to fight pandemics.

An international treaty on pandemics would support and focus on:

- early detection and prevention of pandemics
- resilience to future pandemics
- response to any future pandemics, in particular by ensuring universal and equitable access to medical solutions, such as vaccines, medicines and diagnostics
- a stronger international health framework with the WHO as the coordinating authority on global health matters
- the "One Health" approach, connecting the health of humans, animals and our planet

More specifically, such a treaty can enhance international cooperation in the following priority areas:

Better surveillance of pandemic risks

The monitoring of risks and, in particular, knowledge-sharing on new infectious diseases spreading from animals to humans is a crucial to the prevention of future pandemics.

This could be achieved through:

- increased laboratory and surveillance capacity required to identify animal diseases in all countries
- enhanced collaboration between research centres globally
- better coordination of international funding for core capacities

Better alerts

Introducing more levels of alert commensurate to the degree of health threats would improve accuracy in communication about public health threats. This would enhance the transparency and legitimacy of restrictive or health-related measures.

Digital technologies and innovative tools for data collection and sharing as well as predictive analytics can support real-time communication and early warnings which should, in turn, trigger a more rapid response.

Better response

Health supplies and services

As demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic, global supply chains and logistics systems need to be more resilient to cope with global health threats. All countries should have uninterrupted access to essential supplies, medicines and equipment from anywhere in the world.

Global coordination for effective stockpiling may also ease the pandemic response. The ability to deploy medical equipment and highly-skilled international medical teams on the ground would also represent a step forward in global health security.

Research and innovation

The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated how critical it is for the scientific community to mobilise quickly and for the industry to be able to rapidly scale up their manufacturing capacity.

A globally coordinated approach to discovering, developing and delivering effective and safe medical solutions, such as vaccines, medicines, diagnostics and protective equipment would benefit collective health security.

The sharing of pathogens, biological samples and genomic data as well as the development of timely medical solutions (vaccines, treatments and diagnostics) are vital in order to enhance global pandemic preparedness.

Better response mechanisms

Inequities in access to vaccines, medicines and diagnostics threaten to prolong pandemics and to take a more serious toll on human life and health as well as on our societies and economies.

The treaty would draw the lessons based on the experience of the Access to COVID-19 Tools Accelerator (ACT-A), COVAX and other collective instruments developed since the COVID-19 pandemic started, in order to address global needs more equitably in future pandemics.

Better implementation

The resilience of national public health systems is a crucial element in fighting a pandemic. Countries need to be able to rely on their public health systems in order to effectively respond to the break-out of a pandemic. This could be achieved with a more robust country-reporting mechanism, as well as through the more widespread use of joint external evaluations and better follow-up.

Restoring trust in the international health system

The treaty would ensure that there is more transparency, more accountability, and more shared responsibility in the international system.

In addition, it will set the foundation for better communication and information to citizens. Misinformation threatens public trust and risks undermining public health responses. To redeem citizen trust, concrete measures should be foreseen to improve the flow of reliable and accurate information as well as to tackle misinformation globally.

Process

The World Health Organization

The World Health Organization (WHO) was founded in 1948 with the mandate to act as the directing and coordinating authority on international health work. It has 194 member states, across six regions, and more than 150 offices, and works to achieve better health for everyone, everywhere.

➤ About the WHO (WHO website)

An international treaty on combating pandemics would be a universal instrument which could take the form of a framework convention under the WHO constitution.

A special provision of the WHO Constitution, under Article 19, empowers the World Health Assembly to negotiate and agree on "conventions and agreements with respect to matters within the competence of WHO". This article was used, for example, in 2003 for the adoption of the framework convention on tobacco control.

The treaty on pandemics would be adopted by the WHO member states gathered at the World Health Assembly. Once adopted at international level by the assembly, the treaty would have to be ratified by a requisite number of countries in order to come into force. It would only become legally binding for those countries that ratify it at national level.

Existing global health instruments, especially the International Health Regulations, would underpin such a treaty, ensuring a firm and tested foundation to build upon.

Background

The proposal for an international treaty on pandemics was first announced by the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, at the Paris Peace Forum in November 2020.



We need to go further and learn the lessons of the pandemic. We see that it is absolutely crucial to be able to act more quickly and in a more coordinated way, to ensure that medical equipment is available and to exchange information with each other very quickly in order to protect our citizens as best we can.

— Charles Michel, President of the European Council, at the Paris Peace Forum on 12 November 2020

This call for an international treaty on pandemics was also highlighted by the G7 leaders in their statement on 19 February 2021.

› G7 Leaders statement, 19 February 2021

EU leaders agreed to work on an international treaty on pandemics on 25 February 2021.



We are committed to advancing global health security, including by strengthening the World Health Organization and working towards an international treaty on pandemics within its framework.

— Statement of the members of the European Council, 25 February 2021

› Statement of the members of the European Council on COVID-19 and health, 25 February 2021

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