

# Agree on the Pandemic Accord



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● The COVID-19 pandemic has had a devastating impact on lives, livelihoods, and human progress. The numbers are staggering: an estimated 24 million global excess deaths, global economic losses of at least \$14 trillion, and at least 70 million more people pushed back into extreme poverty.<sup>8</sup> The pandemic has dealt the biggest setback in two decades to global poverty reduction, health, and progress toward all the Sustainable Development Goals. Yet pandemic preparedness, prevention, and response (PPR) is rapidly disappearing from the global priority list.<sup>9</sup>

Two key drivers of the pandemic were the failure of individual nations to prioritize, plan, and adequately invest in preparedness, and the collective failure to join forces in a timely, concerted global response. Although 196 countries are obligated under the International Health Regulations (2005) to take certain steps in the case of public health events with cross-border potential, there is no enforcement mechanism and compliance varies widely.<sup>10</sup> When COVID-19 hit, nationalistic instincts prevailed, resulting in massive inequities between wealthy and poorer nations in access to life-saving vaccines, treatments, diagnostics, and other tools—and prolonging the crisis for all.

To address these failures, in 2022 the World Health Assembly agreed to launch international negotiations on a new Pandemic Accord.<sup>11</sup> Similar to how the 2015 Paris Agreement established a global framework to accelerate climate action, the Pandemic Accord would strengthen the rules of the road and compel WHO Member States to act individually and collectively to reduce the risk of deadly pandemics, stop their spread, and save lives. With infectious disease threats increasing in frequency and severity—experts predict the next pandemic could emerge anywhere, at any time—a better global rulebook is urgently needed.

The draft Accord under negotiation has the potential to bolster pandemic PPR in several ways.<sup>12</sup> It would accelerate the timeline for research, development, and equitable delivery of vaccines and other medical countermeasures. It would incentivize countries to surveil and share data on outbreaks and new pathogens, knowing they will receive support from the international community rather than being punished. It would also bolster regulatory, workforce, and other health system capacities critical for effective PPR and other health needs. A Conference of Parties would undertake regular progress reviews and hold member states accountable. For the Accord to be transformational, however, it must be backed up by additional, sustainable financing and sustained political leadership.

While the Accord will not be a silver bullet, it will be an essential weapon in our global arsenal against an existential threat to humanity. It could mean the difference between localized outbreaks that are swiftly snuffed out at their source and a fast-moving global crisis that kills millions and shuts down economies. COVID-19 showed that no country is safe from pandemics, so a new global agreement is in every nation's self-interest and would give a major boost to multilateralism. ■