

# Expand the Pandemic Fund to protect the world



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## COOPERATE AGAINST VIRUSES

● During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, I had the honour of serving Nigeria as the head of its Centre for Disease Control (NCDC). The NCDC is the body tasked with trying to understand how infectious diseases like COVID-19 are moving through the community, and to advise decision-makers on what course of action to take. That is not an easy job at the best of times. A global pandemic was therefore a challenging period to say the least.

Nigeria has some excellent healthcare professionals and committed public servants, but it is also home to millions of people living in extreme poverty with little access to care. With one of the highest population densities in the world and tropical conditions, it provides an ideal environment for the emergence of new viruses and the spread of known ones. When the healthcare budget for life-saving treatment is at a bare minimum, it is hard to find resources to track and analyse viruses. With much of the population undocumented and underserved, tracking diseases is even harder. Yet, if a new disease were to emerge from Nigeria, the whole world would be at risk.

That is why international cooperation is so important—not just for Nigeria, but to enable every country to set the systems in place to protect its own people, and the rest of the world, from diseases that do not respect borders.

So far, not enough is being done to ensure that all countries are acting in their collective best interests, from a shared risk perspective. We are still too heavily reliant on the old system of “foreign aid” from the benevolent rich to the poor, to solve a problem that requires everyone, everywhere to contribute, and benefit.

Last year, a new financing mechanism was launched called the Pandemic Fund, housed in the World Bank, with technical support

from WHO. The Fund identified a need for \$10 billion per year in financing to build health emergency systems in every country. These systems could identify and respond to threats, no matter where they emerge. To date, only \$2 billion has been contributed, and it is far from clear whether any more funding will be forthcoming. The money has been contributed by a small number of the “usual suspects”— high-income countries with significant foreign aid budgets, and a few large philanthropic foundations. Their generosity is welcome. But clearly it is insufficient to provide the resources the world needs.

Thinking of the Pandemic Fund as a “foreign aid” exercise is insufficient in the first place. It implies that pandemic preparedness is “someone else’s problem,” and an act of charity. In reality, this is everyone’s problem, and an act of self-preservation. The Pandemic Fund could be much more if it were to receive contributions from all countries and also benefit all countries. It could turn into a true health emergency protection system for the world, with all countries contributing what they can. If that were the case, the \$10 billion annual bill would be easily raised.

The Pandemic Fund’s first round of funding is currently underway. What comes next is crucially important for the world’s preparedness for future pandemics. If this is a one-off experiment, a financial footnote to COVID-19, we will be woefully unprepared for the next global threat. But if we build and grow this new mechanism into a global health protection system where every country contributes and benefits, we stand a chance of doing far better next time. ■