



Welcome Remarks by Co-Chairs

Her Excellency Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, former President of Liberia
The Right Honourable Helen Clark, former Prime Minister of New Zealand

To the 1st Meeting of the Independent Panel for Pandemic Preparedness and Response
17 September 2020

Remarks of Her Excellency Ellen Johnson Sirleaf

On behalf of Former Prime Minister Helen Clark and myself, I would like to welcome all of you to our first meeting and say, once again, how honored we are that you have agreed to join this important Panel.

As you can see, we made deliberate effort in identifying a very strong team of esteemed and independent people, with different competencies and representation from across the world.

We value who you are and your contribution to the work of the Independent Panel. Together, this Panel represents a wealth of experience in global health, diplomacy, education, speaking for women and youth, and economics.

The world finds itself in an age of pandemics. COVID-19 is not the first pandemic – it will not be the last. It may not be long before the world faces the next pandemic. I know because I faced a major epidemic not long ago. I was President of Liberia during the 2013-16 West Africa Ebola epidemic. That epidemic claimed the lives of over 11,000 people and resulted in billions of dollars of economic losses across the region.

I learned first-hand that our global system of preparedness and response is only as strong as its weakest link. I also learned the best emergency systems are every-day health systems that can surge during times of crisis. By the end of the outbreak in 2016 there was plenty of evidence to signal the urgent need for countries to strengthen their every-day health systems – to strengthen their preparedness to respond to new pandemics.

But fewer than half the countries of the world have the public health capacity to prevent or respond to new outbreaks of disease.

It is no wonder then that the COVID-19 pandemic is an unprecedented challenge. COVID-19 has claimed too many lives. It has devastated health systems, economies and societies.

The pandemic has also exacerbated inequities that exist between and within countries and regions. It is clear that the global institutions established by governments through the UN system are not adequately equipped enough to respond to a pandemic of the magnitude we see right now.

The task at hand is to learn lessons at this stage of the COVID-19 pandemic to strengthen the world's response to its next stage – and to ensure we are all better prepared for future pandemics. To accomplish this, we as The Independent Panel have to ask the right questions, offer expertise, and really listen and learn from one another.

There are four key points my Co-Chair and I want to stress with regards to our work as The Independent Panel:

First, The Independent Panel should pursue an evidence-based quest to protect human health.

The mission of the Independent Panel is to provide an evidence-based path for the future, grounded in lessons of the present and the past to ensure countries and global institutions including specifically WHO effectively address health threats and protect human health.

Second, The Independent Panel must leverage science and world-class technical expertise on pandemics, health, and the broader impacts of the COVID19.

We need to learn all that we can about COVID19's early emergence, global spread, health, economic and social impacts, and how it has been controlled and mitigated.

Third, The Independent Panel must be independent and impartial.

We should take 'independent' and 'impartial' seriously. We should draw from our expertise and experience but not represent institutions or governments. We ask you to refrain from commenting publicly on government or institutions' individual responses to COVID19 as it undertakes its work. This approach keeps us focused on establishing facts and making recommendations.

Fourth, The Independent Panel believes the world could have done better.

No one wants to repeat the experiences of COVID19. We've had years of warnings about a pandemic, and have institutions, instruments and plans that were designed to protect us. This has not been enough. In most places, the systems and plans meant to protect us have not worked as intended. We believe that should another pandemic arise, and history tells us it that will, we simply must do much better.

I hope that as a result of our independent work, we will be able to determine why the systemic breakdowns and inadequacies have persisted for so long.

And I hope that our work leads not to a report that will sit on a shelf, but to bold, credible, robust and implementable solutions that ensure our world is better prepared for the next pandemic.

This is the challenge before us. And it is a challenge we must rise to face together.

I will now give the floor to my fellow co-chair The Right Honourable Helen Clark.

Remarks of The Right Honourable Helen Clark

Thank you, President Sirleaf and a big welcome also from me to all Panelists.

The eyes of the world are firmly on our panel, and we have a big task ahead.

We embark on our work at a time when a 'perfect storm' of challenges faces our world. Before the pandemic struck,

- geopolitics were tense and multilateralism was struggling;
- critical ecosystems were under threat;
- forced displacement of people was at record highs, with numbers climbing year on year;
- trends on progress across the Sustainable Development Goals were not encouraging.

The pandemic presents as another huge challenge on top of those we already faced and has exacerbated a number of the pre-existing challenges.

With it has come an infodemic of fake news spreading through social media platforms and eroding trust in science and public health leadership. It is in this challenging context that our Panel begins its work.

President Sirleaf and I are clear that our Panel must shed light on what has happened and why, but we do not see this exercise as a blame game. It is about truth seeking, distilling lessons

learned, and making recommendations for how collectively the world can be better prepared to respond as this pandemic rolls on and as future potential pandemics loom.

Let me underline important messages from us as co-chairs;

1. As The Independent Panel, we should be ready to listen and learn from a wide range of people to understand, in the response to COVID19, what worked and what didn't work, and why.

But as we listen and learn, we must also ask tough questions. Over the course of several months, the Panel is expected to seek evidence and views from a broad range of people, including from WHO, Member States, health experts, economists, specialists on the social impacts of the pandemic, and from civil society, the private sector and from the general public - including from those "long haulers" most affected by COVID-19.

2. The Independent Panel should focus both on establishing the facts and making recommendations for the future.

We need to establish authoritative timelines, assemble the best evidence we can, and draw on that knowledge to recommend ways in which global institutions and countries can do better in safeguarding human health and wellbeing.

We should also draw from and build synergies with parallel initiatives. These include:

- the ongoing work of the Global Pandemic Monitoring Board. It released its latest report this week, "A World in Disorder", and its co-chairs briefed President Sirleaf and me on it last night.

- the International Health Regulations Review Committee and the Independent Oversight and Advisory Committee, both of which are also reporting to the World Health Assembly. Our secretariats have already connected with each other to ensure that we can draw on their work.

Let me say again that our Panel needs to come to an objective understanding of the key events which have led to the pandemic and where it stands today, assess the evidence, and distill lessons learned to enable us to recommend forward-looking reforms. These may help with course correction as the pandemic continues, whilst also ensuring better preparedness for the next potential pandemic.

With all the above in mind, we as Co-Chairs, our advisors and the Secretariat have put a lot of thought into the range of competencies needed to carry out the comprehensive, independent and impartial review of the international health response to COVID-19 which we have been mandated to conduct.

We are very happy to have assembled this group, and we look forward to getting to know each of you as our work proceeds.

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