



Presentation from the Co-Chairs of the Independent Panel for Pandemic Preparedness and Response

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

Her Excellency Ellen Johnson Sirleaf:

Thank you, Chair.

Greetings, representatives of Member States.

We thank the World Health Assembly for enabling us, as Co-Chairs of The Independent Panel for Pandemic Preparedness and Response, to brief you today.

Before I share an update on the Independent Panel's work, allow me to reflect on the COVID-19 pandemic and the toll it has taken on people around the world.

We know this new virus has been an explosive shock. In ten short months since COVID-19 was declared a Public Health Emergency of International Concern, there have been over 50 million cases and over one million deaths. Like past pandemics, the impact of this one has been unequal. The virus has preyed on vulnerable bodies and vulnerable communities. Death rates are higher where health care systems are weakest and where those living in poverty have had limited access to health care. Our hearts go out to each and every person who has lost a loved one to this terrible disease.

The virus has cast a long shadow. It hasn't only devastated our immune systems – it has devastated our health systems and our economies. Unprotected health workers have fallen sick and health systems have been overwhelmed. This has led to hundreds of thousands to millions of deaths not just from COVID-19, but from untreated HIV, tuberculosis, malaria, and mothers and children who go without routine prenatal care and vaccines. Millions have lost their jobs and too many have been driven into hunger. The world could experience its deepest recession since the Second World War. Wealthy countries have deployed more than 9 trillion dollars in economic stimulus and poorer countries have struggled to stabilize their economies.

COVID-19 has also deepened inequities. School terms ended suddenly leaving hundreds of millions of the poorest children without access to education. COVID-19 has placed heavier burdens and risks on women, especially those in caregiving roles. The virus has had little mercy on the poor in urban and rural communities, racial and ethnic minorities, refugees, and essential workers, who have all been hard-hit.

Despite the challenges, I remain optimistic. Some countries have dealt well with the virus and we should be asking what we can learn from them. They have adopted universal masking in healthcare and community settings, invested in community-based case finding, testing, tracing and public health systems capacities, and they have prepared their health systems to deal with the surge in COVID-19 cases. Vaccines, tests and treatments are also being created. And to control this pandemic, we must ensure these innovations benefit all who need it.

As many parts of the world continue to face a surge in cases, we must not repeat the history of pandemics. Many health systems are still overwhelmed, with low-income regions disproportionately impacted due to unequal access to health workers, oxygen treatment, ventilators, testing, and personal protective equipment. We are leaving

people behind and more has to be done with more urgency. The idea that wealthy nations and the privileged will gain access to life-saving tools like vaccines, testing or treatments, while the poor and marginalized will get excluded from these tools is the story of every pandemic humanity has faced.

We cannot let this happen again. We must not let this happen again.

What's needed now is equity. What's needed now is solidarity.

What's needed now is humility. It's said that "if you've seen one pandemic, you've seen one pandemic." Each pandemic is unique and there is a lot to learn from this one.

We must learn from this pandemic so we can better respond to its next phase and better prepare for the next pandemics we will face.

That is why in May of this year, you as member states requested the WHO Director-General to initiate an independent, impartial and comprehensive evaluation of the International Health Response to COVID-19.

As you recall, the Director-General appointed me and Prime minister Helen Clark as the co-chairs on July 9, and asked us to define our Terms of Reference, establish a secretariat and appoint panel members.

Since then, we have made good progress. A Progress Report has been made available to you as an "Information" document. It covers the key milestones we presented already at the Executive Board Special session, including the steps taken to establish the Panel and form the Secretariat, together with the key outcomes from our first two meetings. The Progress Report also provides an overview of our Program of Work – a living document that details the themes of our work.

We as co-chairs are delighted to be able to work with eleven exceptional panelists representing a wealth of experience and technical expertise. It is a strong, diverse, and independent panel, and which has now begun asking the hard questions. Its work is being informed by and draws from additional knowledge and expertise of Member States and the wider health, scientific, and civil society communities.

We are also working with the Review Committee on the International Health Regulations and the Independent Oversight and Advisory Committee.

Both the Chairs and Secretariats of these bodies are well-connected, meeting regularly and working collaboratively to achieve our shared goals.

Coordination between the three groups is essential. As was discussed at the WHO Executive Board meeting, the work among these three groups is complementary and synergistic.

Let me finish by saying how grateful we are for a good start and foundation for the Independent Panel's work including feedback, suggestions and support from you all. Your support helps The Independent Panel to do its work.

I now hand over to my Co-Chair, Right Honourable Helen Clark, to talk more about our program of work, our first and second Panel meeting and our next steps, including how this Assembly might help us achieve our objectives.

The Right Honourable Helen Clark:

Thank you, President Sirleaf.

Honourable Chair, representatives of Member States.

The Independent Panel has moved from its establishment and planning phase to implementation of its workstreams based on its Program of Work.

We are working to address four lines of enquiry: building on the past, reviewing the present, understanding the impacts of the pandemic, and looking at recommendations for the future.

Of special interest to us right now, and a top priority, is to establish an accurate chronology of epidemiological, alert, and response events related to COVID-19 – setting out what happened and when. We will:

- review studies and grey literature on the epidemiological facts around COVID-19,
- take into account findings from other completed or active studies, including those by the OIE/FAO/WHO “Investigations into the Origins” Group,
- review WHO COVID-19 documents, and
- hold interviews with experts and relevant stakeholders.

Based on this, we aim to establish the facts about what happened, and to draw lessons from what we learn in order to shape recommendations on what must improve in the future.

Another priority is to review and learn from national responses by seeking answers to questions such as:

- How were national and sub-national strategies defined, and how did the strategies for limiting and containing the outbreak evolve over time?
- How has the scientific evidence been used throughout this process?
- How have strategies evolved as new evidence became available?
- How did the balance between getting high quality evidence, timeliness of action, and application of the precautionary principle play out?

We will assess different responses in terms of when and how emerging evidence has informed responses throughout the pandemic. We will look at the role of experts nationally and internationally in shaping these responses. We will examine the measures taken in specific countries and regions with a range of different experiences in managing COVID-19. This analysis should present important lessons.

Varying socioeconomic and political contexts mean that a “one size fits all” approach to the management of COVID-19 at the national level is unlikely to be appropriate. But, we believe that countries do find it useful to share experiences, and to consider policy alternatives and solutions developed by others and calibrate them according to their domestic circumstances and resources.

A third priority is to review how well the World Health Organization and the international system at large have been able to deliver on country needs and expectations.

We are asking whether WHO has the right mandate, the right powers, the right capacities, and the right financing to deliver on pandemic preparedness and response.

But we are also looking beyond WHO to understand how the multilateral system has, or has not worked together effectively, and we will consider what potential changes could be made.

The International Health Regulations are of special interest as the existing legally binding international instrument. We are co-ordinating with the IHR Review Committee, as was mentioned by President Sirleaf.

Finally, as can be seen from our Program of Work, we have also initiated some work around the impact of the pandemic on essential health services, access to protective equipment, and access to diagnostics, treatment, and vaccines, as well as on the role of trust and of communication about the pandemic and on how it has and impacted communities and economies at large.

Let me finish by saying that we are grateful for not only the interest and support of Member States, but also by your contributions to our work.

We have been engaging widely with Member States and other stakeholders, including through constructive meetings with regional groupings and bilaterally. We are pleased with the level of engagement, and we are aware of the expectations of our work.

We have opened up a process for Member States and others to make contributions to our work through our web page, which has been well received. We encourage governments and other partners to share with us their experiences and suggestions. We will open up additional survey opportunities in the weeks ahead.

The Independent Panel will do its best to shed light on what has happened, is still happening and why. Based on that we aim to formulate a set of recommendations aimed at enabling the world to do better the next time a pathogen with pandemic potential emerges.

Thank you for your attention.