



The Changing Face of Global Health

What Does the US Withdrawal Mean for Pandemic Preparedness and Response?

Report of an event held by The Independent Panel during the World Health Summit Regional Meeting
New Delhi, 25 April 2025

The
Independent
Panel
FOR PANDEMIC
PREPAREDNESS
& RESPONSE



The event

The event, titled “The Changing Face of Global Health - What does the US Withdrawal Mean for Pandemic Preparedness and Response”, welcomed a full room on day one of the World Health Summit Regional Meeting in Delhi on April 25, 2025. Rajat Khosla, the Executive Director of the Partnership for Maternal, Newborn and Child Health moderated a dynamic panel including:

- the Right Honourable Helen Clark, Co-Chair of The Independent Panel for Pandemic Preparedness and Response (Chair)
- Dr. Balram Bhargava, President of the National Academy of Sciences India
- Dr. Lwando Maki, President of the Public Health Association of South Africa
- Dr. Soumya Swaminathan, Chairperson of the MS Swaminathan Research Foundation



Panelists at the WHS Regional Meeting in Delhi, April 2025 (left to right): Rajat Khosla (moderator), Soumya Swaminathan, Helen Clark (Chair), Balram Bhargava, Lwando Maki.

Event context

COVID-19 highlighted the interdependence of countries to prevent and respond to pandemic threats. Cooperation between countries—from data sharing to resource mobilisation, and access to medical countermeasures—is essential to stop emerging threats and ensure they cause the least possible damage to lives, livelihoods and economies.

Yet such cooperation and collaboration are not a given, and the rapidly evolving geopolitical and geoeconomic landscape has wide-reaching implications for how the world prepares for and responds to the next pandemic threat. In January 2025 the US expressed its intention to withdraw from WHO and in the subsequent months went on to largely dismantle its international development architecture. At the

same time, other traditional donors have reduced their official development assistance spending or expressed intentions to do so. These changes highlight the vulnerabilities of a system so reliant on a small number of countries and depending on aid.

During the World Health Summit Regional Meeting in New Delhi, The Independent Panel hosted a discussion on the implications of the United States' withdrawal and broader shifts in global health funding for pandemic prevention, preparedness and response. The session, chaired by RH Helen Clark, explored how to mitigate the immediate concerns and risks, while also setting a longer-term path towards a more robust and resilient system.

This report summarizes reflections made by panelists and major themes emerging from the event.

Impact of the US withdrawal and decreasing official development assistance

A fraught geopolitical landscape

In 2025 the fabric of global collaboration has been torn. As Helen Clark noted, 'solidarity has become a scarce commodity'. Yet the issue of pandemic prevention, preparedness and response is one that no country, or region can take on alone. Progress made towards negotiation of the Pandemic Agreement (subsequently adopted at the 78th World Health Assembly in May), provides some cause for optimism, but the overall landscape for multilateralism is hugely strained, and that poses a major challenge for pandemic prevention, preparedness and response (PPPR), not only on financing, but on other issues such as surveillance and data sharing. Previous examples like the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control serve as a positive example of countries working together and the impact that can be achieved over time.

An abrupt shock to a fragile system

The funding cuts by the US, along with other reductions in official development assistance (ODA), come at a time when many countries are already under financial strain. Soumya Swaminathan highlighted that three billion people live in countries where debt servicing is larger than health services spending. US funding had previously helped establish and maintain critical domestic systems including basic laboratories and personnel. The cuts will inevitably reduce services and harm critical infrastructure. There are questions about how vital global data sharing like the Global Influenza Surveillance and Response System (GISRS) would continue.

"The risk of a pandemic is higher today than ever before." - Dr. Soumya Swaminathan

The cuts will impact regions differently, and countries on the African continent are particularly vulnerable. In 2021, only two African countries had reached the Abuja Declaration target to spend 15% of their annual government budget on health. With three-quarters of HIV/AIDS funding in Africa coming from the US, the withdrawal creates significant challenges for the continent. On the questions of how

countries navigate the disruption, there were calls for reimagining development funding through smart financing, cross-collaboration, and increased philanthropic contributions. The need for regional leadership and self-reliance came across strongly.

“We need to be self-determined as a country.” - Dr. Lwando Maki

Vocal support for the World Health Organization

At a time where WHO is being questioned, and the organisation faces huge financial pressure, panelists recalled the organisation’s historical and current importance in fighting diseases like smallpox and polio, and the critical functions it fulfils around pandemic readiness. The pandemic agreement (which was adopted post-event in May 2025) provides a framework that all member states should implement as soon as possible.

Delivering pandemic preparedness in a changing world

Countries must step up

Health systems require long-term planning, which must come from countries funding themselves. Many middle and low-income countries already have substantial resources, but effective resource prioritization is important for national level preparedness. There is also space for philanthropic and private organisations to play a larger role. The pandemic agreement provides a foundation for what countries need to do for PPPR. This will likely not come into force for several years, but countries should start now to use it as a basis for action. Country management of recent outbreaks, such as that of Marburg in Rwanda, show how leadership can catalyse rapid action to stop an outbreak.

“Global oversight, norms, frameworks are important, even essential, but in the end it’s what happens at the local level which is going to matter.” – RH Helen Clark

Strong regional leadership and institutions

Additionally, strong regional leadership was raised as a critical element in this new, geopolitically strained era. There is an unevenness in how regional institutions have engaged on the issues of pandemic readiness. For example, Africa CDC and PAHO have engaged more on the issue than ASEAN.

Beyond financing, regional self-reliance requires access to knowledge, tools and capacities. Initiatives such as the mRNA technology transfer programme is a model which holds substantial promise, and involves 15 innovators and manufacturers in middle-income countries,

“India will have to scale up and build on their achievements, including maintaining high quality and enhancing active pharmaceutical ingredient production.” - Dr. Balram Bhargava

India now plays a vital role in producing affordable, high-quality medications for HIV and COVID-19 vaccines, positioning India as the "pharmacy of the world". For India to build on its position, it must focus on new drug discovery, R&D, health infrastructure, and public-private partnerships.

Dr. Maki referenced the African principle of ubuntu – centred on communities taking care of each other - and suggested countries need to adopt similar approaches.

Looking forward: opportunities and actions

Restoring trust in science in an increasingly anti-science world is paramount. Panelists raised the importance of data sharing and transparency from governments and public health agencies. Far greater investments are needed to train health workers in communication, and in primary health care and the community health work force.

Looking ahead to the next five years, urgent policy priorities include maintaining momentum in global health initiatives while implementing evidence-based approaches to resource allocation.

Meaningful multisectoral collaborations at the country level will be essential, as will a commitment to self-determination and people-centred policies. Building robust local and regional capacity for pandemic response remains a critical necessity, requiring strong leadership to ensure adequate preparedness.

The session concluded with an emphasis on reframing health as an investment rather than a cost and working collectively with the belief that positive change in global health governance and pandemic preparedness is achievable, even within this highly charged and challenging global context.

Acknowledgement

Report by Divya Lakhotia

About The Independent Panel

The Independent Panel for Pandemic Preparedness and Response was established by the World Health Organization Director-General in July 2020. Co-Chaired by Her Excellency Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and the Right Honourable Helen Clark, the Panel's mission was to provide an evidence-based path for the future, grounded in lessons learned from the management of COVID-19, to ensure countries and global

institutions would effectively address pandemic threats of the future. The Panel delivered its main report, titled COVID-19: Make it the Last Pandemic, to the World Health Assembly in May 2021.

Since delivering on its original mandate, The Independent Panel's Co-Chairs and several members have continued to advocate for implementation of the Panel's evidence-based recommendations, and the Co-Chairs have since issued four follow-up reports. They most recently issued a series of policy briefs titled Pandemic Readiness in an Uncertain World, in May 2025.

The Independent Panel has received independent financial support for its ongoing work to monitor developments, produce regular reports, issue statements, and convene meetings and events with the aim of seeing through reforms of the international system for pandemic prevention, preparedness and response.

Read about The Independent Panel's previous and current work here <https://TheIndependentPanel.org/>