

Does the world need a pandemic treaty?

Carol Natukunda and Patrick Kadama report on the World Health Assembly as it agrees to start drafting a global pandemic agreement

In a bid to protect the world from future infectious diseases crises, the World Health Assembly (WHA) on 1 December 2021 unanimously agreed to kickstart a global process to draft and negotiate a convention, agreement or other international instrument to strengthen pandemic prevention, preparedness and response.¹

This historic decision is in line with Article 19 of the Constitution of the World Health Organization (WHO) which gives authority to the WHA to adopt conventions or agreements on any matter within WHO's competence. The sole instrument established under Article 19 to date is the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, which has made a significant and rapid contribution to protecting people from tobacco since its entry into force in 2005.

Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO Director-General, said the new decision by WHA was historic in nature, vital in its mission, and represented a once-in-a-generation opportunity to strengthen the global health architecture to protect and promote the well-being of all people.

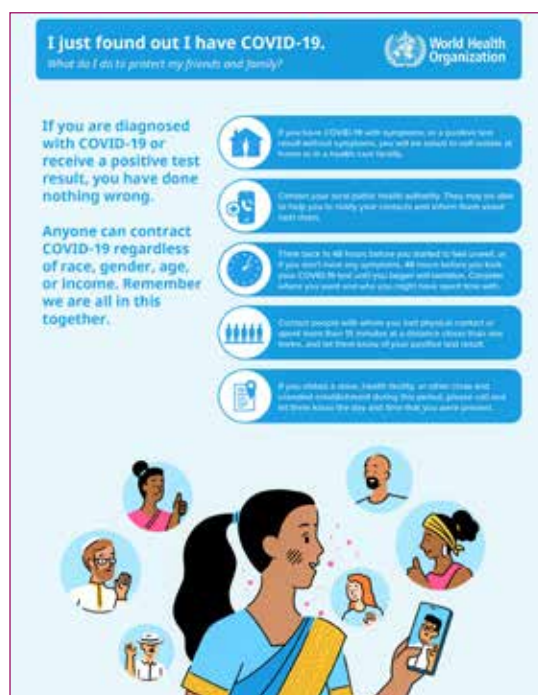
"The COVID-19 pandemic has shone a light on the many flaws in the global system to protect people from pandemics: the most vulnerable people going without vaccines; health workers without needed equipment to perform their life-saving work; and 'me-first' approaches that stymie the global solidarity needed to deal with a global threat," Dr Tedros said.

He added: "But at the same time, we have seen inspiring demonstrations of scientific and political collaboration, from the rapid development of vaccines, to today's commitment by countries to negotiate a global accord that will help to keep future generations safer from the impacts of pandemics."

The WHO Assembly met in a Special Session on 29 November 29 to 1 December 2021. The Assembly normally meets every year in May.

But does the world need a "pandemic treaty"? Is it the right thing, at the right time? Civil society organisations have raised concerns. A report released ahead of the WHA by Geneva Global Health Hub (G2H2), an independent platform of civil society organisations committed to advancing the right to health, conveyed the geopolitical complexities behind the treaty proposal and the drivers of this diplomatic initiative.²

The research report titled 'The Politics of a WHO Pandemic Treaty in a Disenchanted World' includes Carol Natukunda is a communication specialist at the African Centre for Global Health and Social Transformation and Dr Patrick Kadama is the Executive Director of the African Platform for Human Resources for Health.



interviews with international policymakers, health diplomats, civil society actors, academic representatives and public health professionals from across the globe. It gives context to the concerns raised by many developing countries around the diplomatic process and motivations of negotiating new rules for future health emergencies. The report also highlights that this a pandemic of 'inequalities and inequities' between and within countries and genders.

In a press statement posted on the G2H2 website on 30 November 2021, Nicoletta Dentico, Head of Global Health Justice Program, Society for International Development (SID) and G2H2 co-chair, said, "The treaty discussion is full of good intentions, but lacks evidence. The mechanics of the current treaty proposal have been enacted at full speed without a serious assessment of the reasons why the implementation of the current binding arrangement on health emergencies – the 2005 International Health Regulations – have been so broadly neglected and disregarded by all countries in the world. What's the real advantage of starting a negotiation on the same topic again?"

References

- <https://www.who.int/news/item/01-12-2021-world-health-assembly-agrees-to-launch-process-to-develop-historic-global-accord-on-pandemic-prevention-preparedness-and-response>
- <https://g2h2.org/posts/whypandemictreaty>