

Independent Panel for Pandemic Preparedness condemns world governments' response to the COVID-19 pandemic

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“COVID-19 is the 21st century’s Chernobyl moment—not because a disease outbreak is like a nuclear accident, but because it has shown so clearly the gravity of the threat to our health and well-being. It has caused a crisis so deep and wide that presidents, prime ministers and heads of international and regional bodies must now urgently accept their responsibility to transform the way in which the world prepares for and responds to global health threats. If not now, then when?”—Helen Clark and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, co-chairs of the Independent Panel for Pandemic Preparedness

On Wednesday, May 12, 2021, the Independent Panel for Pandemic Preparedness and Response published their findings online in a report titled “COVID-19: Make it the last pandemic.”

The panel was convened by the World Health Organization’s (WHO) Director-General Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus in May 2020 as the COVID-19 pandemic was impacting almost every country on the planet. The purpose of this initiative was to provide a comprehensive review of the international health response to the pandemic.

As noted in a comment published yesterday in *The Lancet*, the panel spent the last eight months examining “the state of pandemic preparedness before COVID-19, the circumstances of the identification of SARS-CoV-2 and the disease it causes, and responses globally, regionally, and nationally, particularly in the early months of the pandemic. The panel has also analyzed the wide-ranging impacts of the pandemic on health and health systems and the social and economic crises that it has precipitated.”

This comprehensive overview will be presented by the panel’s co-chairs, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, former president of Liberia and founder of the Presidential Center for Women and Development, and Helen Clark, former prime minister of New Zealand, at the 74th World Health Assembly to be held in the last week of this month.

The report is an indictment of the entire capitalist order and its misguided, reckless response to a dangerous respiratory pathogen that has officially claimed the lives of more than 3.25 million people, led to the extreme impoverishment of more than

100 million people, and economic losses amounting to some \$10 trillion.

As COVID-19 continues to kill 10,000 people or more every day globally, the pandemic is descending into poorer countries whose public health and medical infrastructure are lacking, threatening the lives and livelihoods of hundreds of millions all over the world who will not have access to the life-saving vaccines for many months or years.

Sirleaf notes that the ongoing catastrophe was due to “a myriad of failures, gaps, and delays in preparedness and response. The shelves of storage rooms in the UN and national capitals are full of reports and reviews of previous health crises. Had their warnings been heeded, we would have avoided the catastrophe we are in today. This must be different.”

The panel found the COVID-19 pandemic could have been prevented. Years of warnings were made that scientists were seeing an increasing rate of emerging zoonotic diseases—SARS coronavirus, Ebola, and Zika— byproducts of the growth of globalization. Yet, gross underfunding and negligence went hand in hand with complete indifference to these warnings.

Clark and Sirleaf explain that the Public Health Emergency of International Concern declaration on January 30, 2020 in response to the emergence of SARS-CoV-2 in China, was ignored by too many countries who took a “wait and see” approach rather than implementing all-inclusive national health security measures to contain or stem the spread of the coronavirus.

The independent panel specifically notes that the warning did not even seem to trigger any significant response by most member states, calling February 2020 “a lost month,” adding that as the coronavirus spread into more countries outside of China, “neither national nor international systems managed to meet the initial and urgent demands for supplies. Countries with delayed responses were also characterized by a lack of coordination, inconsistent or non-existent strategies, and the devaluing of science in guiding decision-making.” There was a complete lack of international leadership, a state of near paralysis having taken hold.

They add, “The panel finds that the system as it stands now is

clearly unfit to prevent another novel and highly infectious pathogen, which could emerge at any time, from developing into a pandemic.”

Despite the efforts made by the WHO staff in providing support through advice, guidance, and shipment of diagnostic tests and personal protective equipment, the agency was both underpowered and underfunded for the mission they were tasked to perform. “International financing was [always] too little, too late.” This lack of preparedness and incapacity to respond has exacerbated the inequality “between and within countries, with the impact being particularly severe on people who are already marginalized and disadvantaged.”

In short, they note, “The combination of poor strategic choices, unwillingness to tackle inequalities, and an uncoordinated response system allowed the pandemic to trigger a catastrophic human and socioeconomic crisis.” According to the International Monetary Fund, the unpreparedness threw the world into the most severe recession since World War Two with the global economy contracting 3.5 percent. They forecast that by 2025, the financial impact on the world economy by the COVID-19 pandemic will amount to \$22 trillion.

The panel also cites the incredibly challenging tasks performed by health care workers on the front lines of the pandemic, working tirelessly to save the lives of the millions seeking assistance and aid. That at least 17,000 health care workers have died of COVID-19 in the first year of the pandemic underscores how little governments did to protect and support them, highlighting the capitalist ruling elites’ complete indifference to the plight of the working class.

Clark and Sirleaf conclude by calling for the establishment of a high-level Global Health Threats Council led by heads of state and governments. They write, “The disease surveillance and alert system need to be overhauled too. WHO should have the powers necessary to investigate outbreaks of concern speedily with guaranteed rights of access and with the ability to publish information without waiting for member state approval. Sensitivities about sovereignty should surely not delay alerting the world to the threat of a new pathogen and pandemic potential.”

Additionally, they state that to ensure WHO’s financial independence, fees for member states should encompass two-thirds of the WHO base program budget. They specifically noted, “We are also proposing the creation of a dedicated international pandemic financing facility. It must be able to disperse \$5 to \$10 billion a year for preparedness and \$50 to \$100 billion in the process.”

They also call on major vaccine-producing countries and manufacturers to draft agreements on waiving intellectual property rights to these medicines. They declare, “If actions do not occur within three months, a waiver of intellectual property rights under the agreement on trade-related aspects of intellectual property rights should come into force, immediately.” They also called for the speedy support of the

COVAX program by committing “to provide 90 low and idle-income countries ... at least one billion doses, no later than September 1, and to increase that to a total of two billion by mid-next year.”

The report offers a comprehensive overview of the repeated failures by one government after the other in their utter betrayal of responsibilities to those living within their borders, as well as to the world’s population. However, it falls short in identifying the source of these failures—capitalism, which divides the world into competing nation-states controlled by a wealthy elite who privately own and operate the means of production for profit.

As the *New York Times* openly admits: “Whether the recommendations lead to lasting change is an open question. Ms. Clark’s group ... pointedly noted that since the H1N1 pandemic in 2009, there had been 11 high-level commissions and panels that produced more than 16 reports, with the vast majority of recommendations never implemented.” As Dr. Lothar H. Wieler, president of the Robert Koch Institute in Berlin, bluntly stated, “There’s no enforcement mechanism.”

The existential threat posed by the pandemic is not because of the nature of the respiratory pathogen, SARS-CoV-2. Such threats have been part of human history. Presently, with the advancements in science and technology, human civilization’s capacity to check these threats is unparalleled. The threat posed by the virus is due to the anarchy that characterizes capitalism.

The pandemic is a health crisis for which a political solution is most urgent. A truly global response is only possible under socialism, in which the world is united under the control of the international working class, and society is reorganized to meet human need rather than the profit interests of the large banks and corporations.



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