

Report on COVID-19 and Multilateralism

The COVID19 pandemic has reinforced the issue of health as an essential component of security and demonstrated that multilateral action cannot be separated from the well-being of people in every country across the globe. This has triggered calls for a stronger and more effective multilateral system; one strong enough to tackle old and new vulnerabilities while leaving no one behind. Elizka Relief Foundation welcomes this opportunity to contribute to the Report of the Independent Expert on Covid 19 and Multilateralism through the following key questions

1. **What are the key obstacles to a more effective, inclusive and networked multilateralism to handle the COVID-19 pandemic, in terms of both health response and economic recovery?**

While the challenges facing multilateralism are not new, the Covid 19 pandemic has made some of these issues and concerns more pronounced and has certainly exacerbated the pressure on the multilateral system. The foundations of collective security have been shaken and the confidence in the possibility of collective responses to common problems and challenges have been undermined.

Consequently, nationalist impulses, diverging and shifting goals, and a preference for unilateral action around the world, have continued to plague international organizations that facilitate multilateralism.

One of the key obstacles to a more effective multilateral system particularly in the time of the Covid Pandemic could be attributed to the fact that the health, economic, technology and climate sectors, which fosters deep connectivity between countries, simultaneously provides an atmosphere of geopolitical competition between actors with varying political and economic models and values.¹

Consequently, international institutions set up to facilitate common goals such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and World Trade Organization (WTO) have become handicapped by the diverging competing interests and values of competing countries. Furthermore, the systemic competition, has created dependencies between countries which have represented strategic obstacles which have hampered health and economic recovery during the covid 19 pandemic; as state actors offer or withhold vaccines, health gear and other facilities for geopolitical reasons, and a pathway towards international primacy.²

¹ <https://ecfr.eu/publication/how-europe-can-rebuild-multilateralism-after-covid-19/>

² Ibid.

Another key obstacle is the increased nationalist and protectionist policies to combat the crisis. In April 2020 the WTO published a report published on export restrictions as a consequence of the pandemic, which showed that 80 countries including the EU imposed export bans, restrictions and other safeguards measures against trading partners mostly in areas of medical supplies and protective equipment.³ These protectionist measures and lack of global cooperation have resulted in the destruction of global value chains in sensitive areas and most importantly hurt the health sectors of the most vulnerable developing countries.⁴

Additionally, existing geo-economic tensions, particularly the rivalry between the United States and China, has also presented a key obstacle to the multilateral system. Under the Trump administration, the United States ultimately relinquished its global leadership role by withdrawing from the Migration Compact and the Paris Climate Agreement, as well as weakened WTO trade negotiations which threatened the entire multilateral trading system. Furthermore, using the America First strategy, the US unilaterally leveraged its economic power to push its interests in various policy areas.⁵

The Trump administration's assault on the multilateral order has been replicated by similar approaches by other international actors such as China and Russia. China has (for quite some time) put geo-economics at the center of its global policies as represented in its Belt and Road Initiative; and promotes an aggressive trade and technology strategy (Made in China 2025) at the expense of other countries. Russia has also worked hard to discredit the multilateral system for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons.

2. What are the solutions to overcome such obstacles in a fair and sustainable manner (including targeted reforms)?

The Covid-19 pandemic can be described as a magnifier of existing trends and tensions within the multilateral system. It has created a multidimensional crisis with strong impacts on the health, social, economic, political and cultural conditions of all countries. However, despite this stark realization of the failure of multilateralism, the present challenges can be overcome through cooperation to solve the challenges of global health, and its impact on all other sectors; as well as pending issues of climate change and conflicts.

³ <https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iaip2039.pdf>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ <https://online.ucpress.edu/currenthistory/article/120/822/3/114548/The-International-System-After-Trump-and-the>

The reopening and relaunching of human activities thus provides an opportunity to reshape and reconceptualize the tools needed for a functional and effective multilateral system by adjusting its principles to the present realities in a fair and sustainable manner through the replacement of unilateral approaches to problem solving, with broader network approaches which will bring various non-state actors and communities together to nurture and inspire each other in ways that will create stronger and more sustainable solutions to common problems.

It is particularly important that multilateralism is used to bridge the many value gaps that exist in the modern world where communality of values is seen as the common goal; another important solution therefore will be the inclusivity of not only government and state actors but also non-state actors, NGOs, local and regional actors in the decision-making process to reflect the convergence of specific interests to allow for inclusive and innovative partnerships for sustainable solutions to common problems.

3. What are your views on a new international treaty for pandemic preparedness and response?

Pandemics strike at the fabric of society. Apart from the health impacts, it creates the worst social and economic impacts on human lives⁶ through an atmosphere of uncertainty, weakened institutions and undermined trust, morality shocks and increased crime, political and social unrest, exacerbation of inequalities, strains on the social contract, and questions the notion of a future safer and better than the present.⁷

As is already evident from the impacts of the Covid 19 pandemic, fragile countries where the bonds between the state and its citizens are frayed and who were not ravaged by the virus itself have been especially affected with potentially devastating consequences such as exacerbated conflicts, severe humanitarian crisis and disruption of global coordination on public health issues for themselves and within regions.⁸

However, high-income countries have also not been spared as many have felt the socio-economic impacts of the Covid19 pandemic.⁹ Furthermore, it is evident that the failure of a strong and effective multilateral leadership and cooperation at the international level can only lead to the exacerbation of tensions within and between countries. It is therefore important that global

⁶ Shang Y, Li H and Zhang R (2021) Effects of Pandemic Outbreak on Economies: Evidence from Business History Context. *Front. Public Health* 9:632043. doi: 10.3389/fpubh.2021.632043

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ See <https://www.usip.org/blog/2020/06/covid-19-and-conflict-implications-fragile-societies>

⁹ See Josephson, A., Kilic, T. & Michler, J.D. Socioeconomic impacts of COVID-19 in low-income countries. *Nat Hum Behav* 5, 557–565 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-021-01096-7>



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responses consider not only the health impact but also the long-term socio-economic impact of pandemics.

Elizka Relief Foundation believes that the international health treaty could provide a means to foster a peaceful coexistence by encouraging member states to adopt a holistic approach that protects health, while strengthening the social contract and international solidarity to sustain peace. It is therefore imperative that policymakers, national and international actors to employ a general equilibrium approach to analyze the health economic and social impacts of pandemics, as well as measures to contain them, on peace and violence dynamics. The assessment undertaken on a continuous basis should be context-specific and should inform policymaking in all relevant sectors.

Secondly, it is important that all parties to the treaty ensure that health and economic responses are designed specifically to avoid exacerbating preexisting grievances and inequalities and most importantly avoid creating new problems. In conclusion the importance of a strong and effective multilateral system cannot be overemphasized. Thus, it is important that global cooperation is seen as a fundamental part of efforts to combat pandemics as well as sustain peace during the pandemic.