PREVENTING PANDEMICS AT THE SOURCE

Statement from the Secretariat of the Initiative to Prevent Pandemics at the Source in response to the findings and recommendations of the WHO mandated Independent Panel for Pandemic Preparedness and Response

Noon, May 12, 2021

We coordinate a coalition of leading public health and environmental organizations focused on pandemic prevention at the source. Peer-reviewed analysis by leading economists, public health experts and scientists underpins all our recommendations.

We applaud the recommendations in the new report launched today by the **Independent Panel for Pandemic Preparedness and Response**. They highlight the failings and weaknesses of governments and institutions globally to prevent the COVID-19 pandemic and what must be done to ensure this never happens again.

At the same time, we are deeply concerned that the mandate and scope of the independent panel's work *ignored the deeper source of all pandemics over the last century*—spillover of viruses from animals, particularly wildlife, into people.

Experience with Ebola, Zika, and COVID-19 in just the past seven years teach us that infectious diseases will surprise us again and again, and **post-spillover preparedness and response efforts alone, as emphasized by the Panel, may not be effective for future infectious diseases**. For example, even if fully implemented, the Panel's recommendations would not prevent a pandemic caused by a novel virus that is harder to detect with a longer incubation period. Such a virus could spread around the entire world before being detected, let alone contained.

COVID-19 sadly shows us that post-spillover efforts are not fully effective. Over the past year, many resource-rich countries with advanced public health systems failed to contain COVID. Even now, we are seeing that the holy grail of COVID control—vaccines—will not be enough. Wealthy countries with virtually unlimited supplies of COVID vaccines cannot vaccinate enough of their populations to achieve herd immunity because large segments of their population do not want the vaccine. The spread of disinformation, the underpinning of vaccine hesitancy, will continue to thwart future pandemic response efforts.

Furthermore, the independent panel fails to take into account sufficiently the possibility of mutations after a pathogen spills over, causing post-spillover efforts such as through medications and vaccines to be less effective. *We are not underestimating the importance of health system preparedness. Instead, we are simply making the case that it is only one half of the solution.*

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Like most other pandemic prevention reports and high-level discussions, the Independent Panel focused on containment measures *after* pathogen spillover from animals into humans has occurred and ignored the actions that can prevent pathogen spillover in the first place.

We urge global leaders, including the G7 and G20, to address this issue at the root and incorporate spillover prevention into the scope of fully comprehensive pandemic prevention efforts.

Specifically, our analysis shows that **approximately $10 billion per year in financing of spillover prevention to tackle the root causes of future global pandemics** would greatly reduce the risk of a future outbreak long before it begins to spread. Spending billions of dollars to reduce pathogen spillover risk results in a compelling return on investment because containment measures can fail (as COVID-19 has shown) and because full-blown pandemics result in the loss of millions of lives and trillions of dollars.

Harvard University's T.H. Chan School of Public Health, at our invitation, is convening an independent global science panel to further inform our recommendations in the coming weeks. Specific areas where we already know additional financing and capacity will lower the risk of pathogen spillover from animals into people are as follows:

- **Reducing tropical deforestation, forest degradation and forest fragmentation** through financial and technology incentives and support, especially in higher-risk countries. This could include supporting key tropical countries to establish and effectively manage protected and conserved areas in hotspots for emerging diseases.
- **Shutting down commercial wildlife trade that risks contributing to zoonotic spillover events**. This will involve putting in place the necessary regulations, incentives, and monitoring mechanisms - at every stage from production to consumption.
- **Improving biosecurity on farms** in emerging disease hotspots.
- **Rapidly detecting and responding to pathogen spillover in wildlife markets and farms** using proven technology and community-driven networking combined with local government capacity.

As with other aspects of pandemic prevention, preparedness, and response, new funding sources and mechanisms need not entirely cover the costs of the above. Ongoing global and national programs to address climate change, biodiversity, law enforcement and sustainable agriculture already contribute. ***However, they are woefully insufficient, and are not deployed with public health outcomes in mind.***

Maintaining status quo on these drivers of spillover will miss a key, relatively low-cost opportunity to reduce the risk of future pandemics. We must expand the global narrative on how to truly prevent future pandemics and ensure that sufficient funds are set aside to address this issue comprehensively. We urge the global leaders to look beyond the traditional silos that constrain our ability to solve systems issues.

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