



Input from civil society stakeholders on Solidarity, equity and the global response to COVID-19

1. Background

The Global Preparedness Monitoring Board (GPMB) is an independent monitoring and accountability body to ensure preparedness for global health crises. Comprised of political leaders, agency principals and world-class experts, the Board provides an independent and comprehensive appraisal for policy makers and the world about progress towards increased preparedness and response capacity for disease outbreaks and other emergencies with health consequences. Created in response to recommendations by the UN Secretary General's Global Health Crises Task Force in 2017, the GPMB was co-convened by the World Health Organization and the World Bank Group and formally launched in May 2018.

Each year the GPMB issues a report on the state of global preparedness. Last year the report focused on five dimensions of preparedness: responsible leadership, engaged citizenship, strong and agile national and global systems, sustainable financing and robust governance. This year, the GPMB report will examine, among other themes, the urgent need to address fragmentation, incoherence and inequalities that have undermined the global collective response to COVID-19 and other health emergencies and to find a path to a more equitable, more effective health emergency ecosystem. The report will be launched in October 2021.

2. Civil society stakeholder input

As an input to the report, the GPMB is organizing a roundtable on Solidarity, equity and the global response to COVID-19. To support this process, the Board is seeking written input from civil society stakeholders on this issue. This input will be used as part of background documentation for the roundtable.

The GPMB would be grateful if you could submit your written responses to the following questions by email to gpmbscretariat@who.int no later than **25 August 2021**.

3. Questions

1. *Solidarity and the global COVID-19 response*

In many ways, the collective response to COVID-19 has been defined by failed leadership, nationalism, inequalities and obstacles to cooperation and global solidarity.

- a) How have these issues impacted low- and middle-income countries' response to the pandemic?
- b) How have the global community and the international system dealt with these issues? What have been successful elements of the global response? What have been the biggest failures?

2. *Systemic inequity in the global health emergency ecosystem*¹

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed longstanding systemic inequities in the global health emergency ecosystem and the broader international system.

- a) What are some key structural elements of the ecosystem that contributes to these inequities ?
- b) What impact do these structural elements have on effective and equitable health emergency preparedness and response?

3. *Addressing these inequities and improving the global health emergency ecosystem*

- a) How should the global health emergency ecosystem be reformed to improve equity?
- b) What are key measures that should be implemented to ensure future global responses to health emergencies are fairer, more equitable and more effective?

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed and deepened problems that were not new. Civic and democratic freedoms were already being denied before the pandemic: as shown by the CIVICUS Monitor, a tool that tracks civic space in 196 countries, before the crisis struck only [three per cent](#) of the world's population lived in countries where the core civic freedoms of association, peaceful assembly and expression were widely respected. In a world riven by inequality, economic policies were already failing most people, in the global north and in the global south alike. Despite the protections enshrined in international law and national constitutions, people were already being excluded on the basis of their identities. International cooperation was already lacking and contested, with multilateral institutions undermined by the manoeuvring of powerful states, rogue leaders, anti-rights groups and large corporations. And the climate crisis had already revealed just how inadequate and unprepared existing structures were to respond to global emergencies. The pandemic exacerbated, accelerated and further exposed these vital economic, political and social challenges, giving rise to the deplorable practice of vaccine nationalism – a practice that made vaccines largely inaccessible for hundreds of millions of people and will likely slow down global recovery for a long time to come.

Throughout 2020 and into 2021, leaders in multiple contexts sought unconstrained power, refused to submit themselves to political competition and clamped down on dissenting voices. Even as the virus raged, repressive states strengthened the instruments of repression, seeking to consolidate ruling power, cynically seizing on the pandemic as an opportunity to introduce measures that imposed additional restrictions on civil society and political opposition.

Too often, governments and business leaders viewed civil society as an adversary rather than a valuable partner in responding to the crisis. Overreach in the emergency powers and restrictions introduced included censorship, limitations on access to information and violations of the right to privacy, and threats, arrests and detentions of civil society activists, journalists, frontline workers and other concerned people who disclosed information about the pandemic, questioned their government's response, or

¹ Here we define the ecosystem as the institutions, leadership and governance structures, mechanisms, frameworks, policies, actors and stakeholders that contribute to global health emergency preparedness and response.

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exposed failings. In multiple cases, security forces used violence against people deemed to have violated lockdowns, while for human rights defenders [in detention](#), the risks of infection were alarming. In too many contexts, a state power-grab appeared to be underway, raising the risk of a permanent institutionalisation of emergency measures that would roll back fundamental freedoms.

The pandemic further revealed both the persuasive power of disinformation, as harmful rumours were allowed to spread widely, and the cost of censorship, as the Chinese state's attempts to suppress early news of the virus to protect its interests unleashed disastrous global consequences. Many states modelled intrusive tracking and surveillance technologies, while also seeking to normalise internet restrictions. As a result, people struggled to access reliable information that could help protect them and their families, and many became inadvertent spreaders of disinformation.

But the crisis also showed that political choices matter. In recent years we have witnessed the resurgence of far-right populism and nationalism, and of macho, strongarm leaders who, even when they gain power by democratic means, go on to close down space for democratic accountability and dissent. The pandemic exposed many of these political leaders as lacking, as they indulged in grandstanding, fostered division, manipulated public opinion, manoeuvred for political gain and seized opportunities to further suppress struggles for justice and rights. The leadership styles that proved more effective were those that respected scientific advice, prioritised the needs of the most vulnerable, understood the need to communicate honestly and sought to preserve the best possible balance between public safety and hard-won constitutional freedoms.

People largely understood that crisis response involved complex decisions about public health protection and the likely impacts of lockdowns on people and economies, but people fared better when difficult compromises were made through processes that were clear and understandable, steered by political leaders who enjoyed public trust. Among those rising to the challenge were several new women leaders and others taking a feminist perspective who put into political practice the values they share with civil society: compassion, empathy and humanitarian commitment.

Lockdown measures halted much economic activity, casting many more people into precarious living conditions. People lost their jobs or were furloughed, had to take pay cuts or saw their small enterprises, built up through years of striving and saving, shuttered. In some countries people who needed vital treatment faced ruinous healthcare bills. At the same time that many had to stay at home or saw their economic activities curtailed, others had never been busier, daily facing personal risk in their essential work to keep societies functioning. The virus laid bare the fact that people our societies most rely on – medical personnel, emergency responders, transport staff, people who sell and deliver food – are among the least rewarded, and many routinely experience lives of economic hardship and struggle. In contrast, the wealthiest had little to contribute to tackling the crisis. Apart from some cases of philanthropy that entailed negligible relative loss of wealth, most of the super-rich were content to ride out the crisis in luxurious isolation, even adding to their grotesque fortunes through financial speculation. Demands for big business bailouts fuelled public anger about corporate and elite tax avoidance. The pandemic revealed that what was at stake was too important to be left to the market. It further exposed a reality that motivated protests around the world in 2019, in which people demanded fundamental change of an economic system that makes small numbers of people very rich but leaves most people vulnerable to economic shocks and hamstrung by inequality.

While it was true that anyone could catch the virus, those most at risk of infection and most likely to be impacted on by it were impoverished and [excluded people](#). People already living in economic hardship

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were vulnerable because their work most exposed them to danger, because they had least access to medical services and because their living circumstances made physical distancing and access to decent sanitation hardest. Among those most affected were migrants and people from ethnic minorities, who disproportionately have jobs that cannot be done in isolation, and informal workers, who frequently come from excluded groups and were often left without incomes. Older people and those with compromised immune systems, including as a consequence of deprivation, faced the greatest danger from the virus. Women and children under lockdown experienced greater risk of violence and abuse, while many women were forced to take up the bulk of caregiving and education duties, reinforcing their subordination, and many children missed out on vital education. People with disabilities found their rights shredded by emergency rules. Religious and ethnic minorities, people from the Chinese diaspora and [LGBTQI+ people](#) were exposed to threats and violence as a result of disinformation that blamed them for spreading the virus, and were targeted by security forces during lockdowns. The pandemic therefore reinforced the patterns of exclusion that many in civil society have long worked to challenge.

The virus had no respect for borders, making clear how interconnected our world is. It underlined the need for international cooperation and coordination, but also the current dysfunction of global governance. Different states pursued varying paths in response, and some were slow to act on international-level advice, pursuing stridently nationalist approaches that worsened the crisis for the people with least power. The countries that fared best were those that followed the advice, and differential rates of success were proof of the value of global exchange of solutions and technology that are enabled by independent and responsive multilateral institutions. While many borders closed, raising the fear of longer-term restrictions on the flow of people and ideas, key international institutions continued to promote positive values and norms, coordinating debt relief, urging ceasefires and calling for human rights and gender justice to be respected in crisis response. But instead of reinforcing these institutions, prominent political leaders attacked them, continuing their recent practices of weakening them through vilification, withdrawal, defunding and undermining from within.

With many flights grounded, public transportation reduced and much industrial activity halted, the planet saw a temporary reprieve from some of the worst causes of climate harm. In normally polluted cities the air cleared. Awareness of the need for urgent action on climate change was already high, due to the widespread civic activism of 2019 and the wildfires, flooding and other extreme climate events that caused great damage from the Amazon to Australia. The pandemic offered an opportunity to reflect on the climate impact of industrial economies and our everyday activities, and to question our current means of production and commerce. Those responsible for the bulk of consumption and air travel perhaps realised they could get by with less. In many countries, whole generations experienced for the first time what it is like to live under emergency conditions. If they were lucky, they saw their governments follow advice based on scientific consensus and coped better with the crisis as a result; if not, the harm they experienced was exacerbated by authoritarian and reckless leaders focused on the further consolidation of their power. Many of the governments and leaders that disregarded scientific advice on the pandemic, putting people at greater risk as a result, were also those that refuse to take the climate crisis seriously. On all fronts, the importance of acting on scientific consensus to protect people was clear.

Under the pandemic, [civil society's role](#) was more vital than ever. CSOs, always on the frontline of crisis response, provided healthcare, food, shelter and other essentials to those in need. The kind of solidarity that civil society nurtures and mobilises, from the local to the global levels, proved critical in getting people through the crisis. Societies saw an overwhelming voluntary response as people came forward to help their neighbours, sustain their communities and reinforce the frontline. As many people became isolated, they came to appreciate the value of human interaction, community and solidarity, within and across

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borders: fundamental principles that animate civil society. CSOs also worked to model responses to the crisis that supported staff and families and upheld employment rights, including by developing a [social security protocol](#) for civil society workers. Civil society continued to work to hold governments to account, often in difficult conditions, asking probing questions about the quality of response, highlighting failings, insisting that rights be respected and any restriction of freedoms be temporary.