



ROLE OF WHO IN COMBATING COVID

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The World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a public health emergency in January, 2020 and declared it a pandemic in early March, 2020. The outbreak of COVID-19 has been instrumental in exposing how badly prepared countries are for a pandemic. Developed and developing countries alike have been struggling to deal with this pandemic of epic proportions.

Soon after the coronavirus being declared a pandemic, there began pandemic politics, with the United States and China at the centre of it; with a lot of criticism of WHO as being responsible for hiding facts and accusing China of being irresponsible with regards to the virus. At the forefront of this criticism was the US, which as a consequence also decided to cut funding to the WHO and quit from the organization. President Trump stated that the Chinese officials “ignored their reporting obligations” to the WHO about the virus which has killed hundreds of thousands of people globally. He also accused the agency of misinforming the world about the virus. It may be noted that the largest contributions to WHO come from the US and are estimated at around 450 million dollars a year.¹

Although the organization has remained at the centre of controversy ever since the pandemic began, it has played a crucial role in the fight against COVID-19 and continues to do so, despite hurdles. From the beginning, the agency has been instrumental in leading the response to the

¹ Steve Holland, Michelle Nicols, “Trump cutting U.S. ties with World Health Organization over virus”, *Reuters*, May 30, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-trump-who-idUSKBN2352YJ>

pandemic and it initiated action by helping countries to prepare and respond. This was the first step which identified major actions and resources needed by countries to tackle this virus. This preparedness and response plan has continued to be updated since after the pandemic began. The organization's six regional offices and 150 country offices, work closely with governments around the world to prepare their health systems for the negative effects of COVID-19, and on how to respond effectively during the pandemic crisis.² WHO also set up the Solidarity Response Fund, to ensure patients get the care they need, and frontline workers get essential supplies and information. Among others, WHO also started campaigns to disseminate accurate information as well as ensuring the distribution of vital supplies to frontline health workers. Initially, it dispatched more than two million items of personal protective equipment to 133 countries and later launched a "UN COVID-19 Supply Chain Task Force."³ Similarly, the training of health workers has also been one of the agency's top most priorities during the pandemic and it initiated the OPEN WHO platform for this purpose. Moreover, the search for a vaccine and the bringing together of leading experts in this regard was also initiated by WHO in February, 2020.

It may be noted that WHO has in the past dealt very successfully with several global health challenges and amongst them, the most successful endeavors of the agency have been its child vaccination programs which have contributed to the eradication of smallpox in 1979 and led to a 99% reduction in polio infections in recent decades, and has been considerably successful during the 2003 severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) epidemic.⁴ After the outbreak of COVID-19, and it being declared a pandemic, WHO had made an appeal for 675 million dollars in funding from donors but it only received over half that amount. The agency has been coordinating and cooperating with governments on their national responses ever since the outbreak. It can be said that the agency has been proactively dealing with the pandemic, however, for some WHO's response has been a subject of controversy. Many experts have raised concerns about the agency's obsequiousness to Beijing and growing Chinese influence over the institution. The agency has also been accused of accepting misinformation from the Chinese government as the outbreak unfolded and also for its allegedly delayed response to declare a global health emergency. It can be said that no organization can deliver hundred percent successes during a crisis and the same can be said about WHO as well. With limited resources and funding cuts, the global health agency has still performed keeping in view its advisory role and heavy dependence on influential global powers. The timing of the US fallout with

² "5 reasons the world needs WHO, to fight the COVID-19 pandemic", *UN News*, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/04/1061412#>

³ Ibid.

⁴ "What Does the World Health Organization Do?", *Council on Foreign Relations*, December 4, 2020 <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/what-does-world-health-organization-do>

the global health agency is also an important factor which is likely to impact its working in the years to come.

The pertinent questions that have come up during this pandemic are primarily focussed around what kind of global health response is required from an organization like WHO in case the world is confronted with a similar crisis in the years to come. The need for a more robust and well coordinated global health care system is necessary and also that WHO needs to be a more independent and adequately funded organization. The 2020-21 budget for WHO is \$4.8 billion, and most of that budget is non-discretionary and earmarked for specific activities, requiring WHO to make special calls during emergencies for countries to contribute additional funds.⁵ In the current circumstances, with an ongoing global pandemic and a resulting global economic slowdown, this can pose many difficulties for the agency. Therefore, pandemic preparedness for the future requires, among stable funding resources, strong partnerships by WHO with other organizations across the globe. These measures if taken can make the global health agency more effective and away from controversy and global power rivalry.

⁵ Nina Sun, Joe Amon, "The WHO We Need for the Next Pandemic", *Think Global Health*, May 8, 2020, <https://www.thinkglobalhealth.org/article/who-we-need-next-pandemic>