

Countries agree pandemic accord should be legally binding

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Countries meeting to negotiate a new international accord on how to handle future pandemics agreed Thursday that it should be legally binding, the World Health Organization said.

The economic turmoil and millions of lives lost during the coronavirus crisis triggered calls for new international defences strong enough to prevent such a disaster in future.

The 194 WHO member states decided in December to launch the negotiating and drafting process for a new international instrument on pandemic prevention, preparedness and response.

The Intergovernmental Negotiating Body held its second meeting this week in Geneva.

"INB members agreed, through consensus, that they will work to conclude a new, legally-binding international pandemic agreement," the WHO said in a statement.

"As with all international instruments, any new agreement, if and when agreed by member states, is drafted and negotiated by governments themselves, who will take any action in line with their sovereignty."

WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus welcomed the decision, saying it would safeguard families and communities.

"The importance of a legally binding instrument cannot be overstated: it will be our collective legacy for future generations," he said.

INB co-chair Precious Matsoso, from South Africa, added: "The decision today is a first important step of our critical work together. But we still have many hills to climb. It is a journey that will require all of us to stand together."

May 2024 end goal

The INB is aiming to ensure better preparedness and a more equitable response for future pandemics.

The next INB meeting will be held in December and deliver a progress report to the 2023 World Health Assembly, the annual meeting of WHO member states.

Countries are working to conclude the agreement in May 2024.

Hurdles that will have to be cleared by then could include how far countries are prepared to go in terms of commitments on issues like equitable vaccine distribution, knowledge-sharing, financing, oversight structures and powers to investigate outbreaks.

A key issue down the line could be whether countries want beefed-up powers for the WHO to investigate the sources of outbreaks. Tedros has said that the lack of data-sharing early in the COVID pandemic had been a hindrance.

Loyce Pace, the assistant secretary for global affairs at the US Department of Health and Human Services, was in Geneva for the negotiations.

"The United States stands ready to be a part of this, of solving the problem of [pandemic](#) preparedness and response. We weren't quite there when it came to COVID-19 and we want to correct that," she told reporters.

Pace said Washington was open to a mix of binding and non-binding options as part of any wider final outcome.

"What we most prefer... is something that will work for the world," she said, adding: "We don't want to make empty promises that we collectively then can't or won't meet."

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