

Critics say pandemic treaty text is 'step backwards'

May 30 2023



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As negotiations accelerate towards a new pandemic treaty, observers warn that efforts to ensure equal access to the medical products needed to battle future threats are being watered down.

Shaken by the COVID-19 pandemic, the World Health Organization's 194 member states are negotiating an international accord aimed at ensuring countries are better equipped to deal with the next health catastrophe, or prevent it altogether.

The process is still in the early stages, with the aim being to reach an agreement by May 2024.

While the issue did not figure on the agenda of the WHO's main annual assembly, which wrapped up in Geneva on Tuesday, it was on everyone's mind.

'Generational opportunity'

During the closing ceremony, WHO director general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus urged countries to "negotiate a strong accord".

"This accord is a generational opportunity that we must seize," he told the assembly.

"We are the generation that lived through the COVID-19 pandemic, so we must be the generation that learns the lessons it taught us and makes the changes to keep future generations safer."

But critics warn that revisions being made to the preliminary negotiating text are weakening the language—notably in a key area aimed at preventing the rampant inequity seen in access to vaccines and other medical products during the COVID pandemic.

"I think it is a real step backwards," Suerie Moon, co-director of the Global Health Centre at the Geneva Graduate Institute, told AFP.

If poorer nations do not see solid language ensuring they will be better

protected when the next pandemic hits, "there is a real risk that countries will walk away" from the talks, she warned.

Observers said a new revised draft, which was presented to countries last week and will be considered during the next round of negotiations in mid-June, was "cleaner"—but also weaker on some major points.

'Not enough'

In particular, public interest groups criticized the removal of a call for public funds given to private sector R&D to be conditional on more transparent pricing of their products and on technology transfer to poorer countries.

Instead, the updated draft urges countries to strive to promote knowledge-sharing and transparency "in accordance with national laws and as appropriate".

Countries should also "incentivise manufacturers of pandemic-related products to transfer relevant technology and know-how" to lower-income countries, one option says.

"Voluntary measures are not good enough," said Luis Villarroel, head of the Innovarte NGO, which is focused on ensuring a balanced intellectual property system.

The text is "very weak", he told reporters.

There are also elements in the text that are likely to irk the pharmaceutical industry.

They include the option to link the sharing of pathogen samples with a requirement to share the benefits from the resulting products.

While agreeing it is important for all countries to swiftly share samples of viruses and bacteria that could cause dangerous outbreaks, poorer countries want access to the benefits, including the vaccines produced, technology transfers, royalties or capacity building programs.

Benefit sharing?

The International Federation of Pharmaceutical Manufacturers and Associations has warned that linking access to pathogen samples with such benefit sharing could dangerously slow down the sharing of vital data.

"We remain concerned that decisions could be taken that we come to regret in a future pandemic," IFPMA chief Thomas Cueni said in a statement to AFP.

"The innovation system and rapid access to pathogens were both crucial in enabling the pharmaceutical industry to develop new vaccines, treatments and diagnostics in response to COVID-19."

One thing everyone seems to agree on is that new pandemic threats are looming and there is urgency in aligning positions to meet the May 2024 deadline.

"I think we'll get an accord in place if everyone realizes that our window before this next pandemic, this next health threat, is probably not far away," US Health and Human Services Secretary Xavier Becerra told journalists in Geneva last week.

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Citation: Critics say pandemic treaty text is 'step backwards' (2023, May 30) retrieved 7 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2023-05-critics-pandemic-treaty-text.html>

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