

Rt Hon Helen Clark:

ESCAP High-Level Thematic Roundtable: Strengthening Health Responses and Preparedness

Monday 23 May, 2 pm Bangkok local time.

Excellencies, Distinguished participants.

Many thanks for the invitation to address this important roundtable today.

It is appropriate that today's discussion focuses both on the way out of this pandemic and the steps which need to be taken to avert a future one. The emergence of diseases with pandemic potential will continue to occur; the question is whether collectively our world has the resolve to prevent those threats materializing into full blown pandemics like COVID-19. Our future health security is literally in our hands.

Last week, President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and I, as the Co-Chairs of the former Independent Panel for Pandemic Preparedness and Response, issued a one-year progress report on the uptake of the Panel's recommendations on how to end the current pandemic and avert a future one.

Our verdict was mixed: there is some progress in some areas, but it is slow.

Clearly the current pandemic is far from over. People continue to die of COVID-19 in significant numbers, and the SARS-Cov-2 virus continues to mutate as it circulates around the world.

Yet the political resolve and public support for combating more waves of COVID-19 is unfortunately waning, leaving the elderly, the health vulnerable, and the unvaccinated particularly exposed to the damage the disease can do.

What is critical now in all countries is to sensitise populations to the need for public health measures to be calibrated up and down relative to the state of the pandemic in-country. That can mean, for example, recommitting to mask wearing, physical distancing, and vaccine passes. Countries should maintain surveillance testing and have a capacity for genomic sequencing – otherwise we are literally flying blind, not knowing what the state of the disease in-country is.

On the way forward, there is a clear pathway to creating a better preparedness and response architecture at the national, regional, and global levels.

At the national level, every country should formally review its COVID-19 experience and build on that to be better prepared next time a threat emerges.

At the regional level, ESCAP, working with WHO and other relevant agencies, can play a vital role in sharing experiences of what works so that countries can adapt best practice relevant to their national context.

At the global level, WHO must be empowered to act swiftly and decisively when pandemic threats emerge. This could be speedily achieved through amendments to the International Health Regulations.

Dedicated financing for preparedness and response is needed, and under Indonesia's G20 presidency, it seems likely that a new fund to be hosted by the World Bank will be supported. It should be designed to be inclusive, and not be funded out of now stretched development assistance budgets. We need new approaches to financing global public goods, acknowledging that a failure of preparedness and response in any one country has implications for us all.

A key issue is how to ensure equitable access to the tools needed to fight pandemics. We have all seen how the Access to COVID Tools Accelerator (ACT-A) and its vaccine tool, COVAX, have struggled to supply low- and low-middle-income countries with the supplies they need. Under fifteen per cent of people in low-income countries have received two vaccine doses.

ACT-A is to be the subject of an independent evaluation. In the view of the Independent Panel which I co-chaired, we need a redesigned and pre-negotiated end-to end platform covering all the tools which can contain an outbreak at source, stop transmission, and protect people's health. That platform must be driven by an ethos of providing for people in all countries in a timely manner – that did not happen with this pandemic.

Regional capacities for production of vaccines, therapeutics, and other supplies must be boosted.

Overlaying all this is the need for the WTO to agree on TRIPS waivers for the goods required to fight COVID-19. Notwithstanding the early initiative taken by India and South Africa to raise this issue, more than two years into the current pandemic, the negotiations on a TRIPS waiver are protracted and limited to vaccines. I think we need a bigger picture reform here, so that TRIPS waivers apply whenever there is a pandemic to fight.

Ending a pandemic and averting a future one requires a comprehensive reform programme which reaches across sectors. The role of the health sector must be complemented by the international and regional financial institutions, the WTO, and a range of other multilateral organisations. Our Panel continues to advocate the creation of a global oversight council at Head of State and Government level to maintain political momentum and accountability for pandemic preparedness and response.

At the national level too, Heads of State and Government must lead on preparedness and response as a cross-cutting issue which impacts broadly across the social and economic sectors. Universal health coverage and social protection must play a critical role in building resilience, as must digital connectivity which enables education, business, and other sectors to carry on as best they can in adverse circumstances.

ESCAP, with its broad and inclusive mandate, has the ideal platform for encouraging dialogue and co-operation and building consensus across countries in the Asia Pacific region on how to strengthen resilience to the ill winds of pandemic and other threats. I wish it well as it plays that role.