

**Statement of the Right Honourable Helen Clark
Former Co-Chair
The Independent Panel for Pandemic Preparedness and Response
Opening Segment of the UNGA High-Level Meeting
Pandemic Prevention, Preparedness and Response
20 September 2023, UNHQ.**

Excellencies,

Let me congratulate the General Assembly on coming together in this High-Level Meeting on Pandemic Prevention, Preparedness and Response.

Your leadership on these issues is important. You meet knowing that the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in an estimated 24 million excess deaths, and set back progress on the Sustainable Development Goals. Many countries are still struggling to recover.

A virus we didn't know four years ago has settled in worldwide at great cost to people and to governments.

The political declaration before you today has to be a catalyst for the change which stops this from ever happening again.

The question is, how urgently can it be built on to bring the transformation which the international system for pandemic preparedness and response requires? Viruses with pandemic potential won't wait for years for diplomacy to produce results before they strike.

So, where do we need change?

First, on equity. Research and development, and equitable access to diagnostics, vaccines, and treatments, are issues of paramount importance to Member States. Many of us believe that these goods are so crucial to the management of health emergencies that they must be treated as part of the global commons.

There has to be a pre-negotiated and financed end-to-end ecosystem for medical countermeasures. Every region must have the technology, knowledge, and local capacity needed to stop outbreaks when and where they occur. Other essential supplies to safeguard human life must also be accessible. Bottom line: no country should

be at the mercy of global markets to protect its citizens.

Second, on finance. The demand for grants from the new Pandemic Fund is vastly outstripping what is available. A global public investment model is needed to gathering the funds to support low- and middle-income countries. That should also apply to surge financing in the event that a pandemic threat emerges and rapid action is needed. Spending billions will save trillions and will protect human life and future progress on the SDGs.

Third, the Geneva processes must be ambitious. Revised International Health Regulations can help speed up detection, reporting, and alert of pathogens of international concern. WHO must be empowered to sound the alarm rapidly, with evidence, and without bureaucracy. There is no time to lose. COVID-19 spread around the entire globe within four months. That cannot be allowed to happen again.

A new pandemic accord can commit countries to strengthen national health systems, surveillance, solidarity, and equity. This is the world's next opportunity. Please do not miss it.

Fourth, governance. The declaration before you seeks to “Strengthen regional and international cooperation, multilateralism, global solidarity, co-ordination and governance at the highest political levels and across all relevant sectors.” The question is, how will you do this?

Can a leader-level body such as that recommended by the former Independent Panel and others be established? If not now, when?

As a former Prime Minister and a former Minister of Health, I believe that a council of Heads of State and Government is needed to help break the cycle of panic and neglect and sustain political momentum for preparedness and response.

Next year's Summit of the Future may address the management of complex crises and could present another opportunity for action for ensuring leadership at the highest level.

Fifth: accountability. Independent monitoring of country preparedness is needed to guarantee mutual assurance. Compliance and accountability with international agreements is in every nation's interest, and is critical to protecting the most vulnerable

and marginalised.

Preparedness requires working with communities and addressing misinformation and disinformation – starting now. You cannot build trust in the midst of a crisis.

I leave you with this final thought. Imagine if one of us here, now, were infected with a new, dangerous virus. More of us would become infected this week. We would fly back home to our families and communities, potentially sparking another crisis. Would our countries be ready to manage that outbreak? Would the world?

I am confident that human ingenuity and solidarity can make COVID-19 the last pandemic of such devastation.

But that is a political choice. You have the power to make it.

Thank you.