

We cannot give up on the global pandemic treaty

We are on track to squander the political will that brought the commitment to better handle another health catastrophe

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The UN General Assembly hopes to generate agreement on legally binding shared principles before the next pandemic © Andy Wong/AP

Nina Schwalbe 14 HOURS AGO

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As the Covid-19 pandemic waned, our elected leaders lost focus on their responsibility to prevent another such event. Nearly two years after countries agreed to develop a new pandemic treaty, the prospect of achieving a bold new global agreement to prepare and respond to future disease threats is slipping away. The sense of urgency that gripped nations to be better prepared in future has been replaced by complacency.

This year, the UN General Assembly called for a high-level meeting to reinject a sense of urgency into pandemic prevention, preparedness and response. Yet the political declaration for this meeting suggests that pandemic amnesia has already set in. The document is mired in platitudes and hands fundamental responsibility back to the very institutions that failed to respond last time.

How did we arrive at this point?

When the global community resolved to craft a new pandemic agreement in the middle of the Covid-19 panic, the effort felt revolutionary in its clarity, urgency and sense of collective purpose. In December 2021, at a special session of the World Health Assembly, 194 member states decided that a new global agreement was the way forward. An intergovernmental negotiating body was created, and a deadline was set: the text of the treaty would be ready for member states to put their names to by May 2024.

The goal was to generate agreement on legally binding shared principles before the next pandemic, with sufficient authority to promote engagement at the highest levels of government.

That was nearly two years ago. Since then, there have been wide-ranging consultations with governments — big and small, rich and poor — as well as with public health practitioners, academics and advocates. But as this process has played out, political will has ebbed away. Differences of opinion on thorny issues such as data sharing have hardened into near gridlock.

For the final version of the treaty to improve the world's collective capacity to stop pandemic threats, it needs to be able to hold states accountable for their commitments.

When a working [draft was released in February](#), it was ambitious — addressing everything from human rights obligations to vaccine equity and incorporating the complexity of how health threats arise, spread and are treated.

For those countries without the resources to implement necessary improvements, a well-resourced pandemic financing mechanism would help. And as with other treaties, an independent monitoring body would provide candid assessments of state compliance with the terms of the treaty.

Within months of this bold first draft being released, however, its language was watered down. Obligations were downgraded to recommendations, and more rather than less responsibility was delegated to the World Health Organization — a move which ignored the body's understandable difficulties in dealing with politically fraught issues and recalcitrant member states.

Simply heaping more responsibility on the WHO to work things out as they go would leave us where we started. Yet that is where the process is headed. The most recent round of treaty talks failed to bring a breakthrough in any of the areas of disagreement, signalling serious trouble ahead. While there is still time to turn things around, that time is short.

Perhaps the last chance is the UN General Assembly's High-Level Meeting on Pandemics in September. The meeting is a major opportunity for political leaders to show the sustained commitment that will be necessary to prevent and respond to future pandemics. The political declaration posted this week under a Covid-era "silence procedure" — which gives limited time for member states to object — offers little hope.

The consequences of the clock winding down without a useful treaty to show for our efforts are significant. While current public health structures can of course be improved, the past has shown that progress requires something bigger. We need our leaders to have the courage and conviction to come together and commit to an ambitious pandemic treaty that will save lives. Otherwise, history is on track to repeat itself — in the form of more pandemics which could have been avoided.

Elliot Hannon also contributed to this piece