



European
Commission

Improving pandemic preparedness and management

Group of Chief Scientific Advisors to the European Commission
European Group on Ethics in Science and New Technologies (EGE)
Special advisor to President Ursula von der Leyen on the response
to the coronavirus and COVID-19
Joint Opinion, October 2020

Independent
Expert
Report



Read [the full Joint Opinion](#) *Improving pandemic preparedness and management*.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The COVID-19 pandemic has painfully confirmed that the world has been under-prepared for large outbreaks of emerging infectious diseases. The EU is responding to, and learning from, the COVID-19 crisis, with new policy initiatives brought forward by the European Commission on better preparedness for future health threats.

To support and inform that process, we as science and ethics advisors have examined the responses to the COVID-19 and, in part, to previous pandemics, drawing on insights from research and scholarship and taking European values and respect for fundamental rights as critical orientation. This work has revealed important lessons learned and to be learned, on the basis of which we have formulated a range of recommendations that are summarised below.

Prevent and pre-empt

- **Support multifaceted efforts to investigate, map and reduce the risk of emerging infectious diseases globally**, including the surveillance of **pathogen** reservoirs, mitigation, forecasting and early detection of potential outbreaks.

- **Support a combination of complementary approaches for accelerating the research on and development of responses** to pathogens with epidemic and pandemic potential.
- **Strengthen multi- and cross-disciplinary research on pandemic prevention**, preparedness, responses and impacts, analysing the multi-faceted societal aspects and consequences of health crises.

Enhance coordination across Member States and at international level

- **Establish a standing EU advisory body for health threats and crises**, including epidemics and pandemics. This body should liaise with advisory bodies in the Member States as well as at EU and global level. It should have a **multidisciplinary** and inclusive membership so it can advise on biomedical, behavioural, social, economic, cultural, ethical, legal, technological and international aspects. **Monitoring efforts of different Member States could be assembled in a European Dashboard that shares and coordinates key indicators and information** from all Member States about the medical, economic and social impacts to enable real-time comparisons and collective actions, where appropriate.
- **Ensure that monitoring efforts are comprehensive, evidence-based, rapidly shared and well coordinated** across the EU, enabling strategic decisions in response to the situation at hand, insights through real-time comparisons, as well as collective action where appropriate.
- **Establish a joint early-response mechanism** to contain epidemics and pandemics, including a toolbox of strategies, such as testing, tracing, isolating and other containment measures. Any strategy needs to be based on scientific evidence, guided by the fundamental rights framework and applied in a situation-dependent manner. Herd immunity is a concept best applied in the context of vaccine-acquired immunity. Achieving herd immunity through natural infection by a previously unknown pathogen involving risks to life and health conflicts with the WHO's ethical framework and its multi-principled approach, requiring that utility and equity considerations are balanced, and would imply practical challenges regarding the protection of vulnerable populations.
- **Coordinate research and the development and implementation of medical countermeasures** during a pandemic or other health threat. Crucial scientific questions should be clarified as quickly as possible after the onset of a health crisis to rapidly inform effective and safe public health measures. European and global collaboration in these efforts should be reinforced to increase their overall impact.

- **Coordinate research and the development and evaluation of social measures to mitigate harm and to increase resilience** in case of pandemics or other public health crises. Social, economic, psychosocial, ethical, legal and cultural challenges raised by a pandemic should be addressed as quickly as possible after its onset to inform a range of nuanced and locally appropriate measures, ranging from inclusive emergency financial aid schemes to ad-hoc strengthening of institutions providing community support.

Strengthen systems for preparedness and management

- **Encourage Member States to provide healthcare for all**, respecting the principles of justice and solidarity and adhering to the commitments established in the context of European fundamental rights instruments, such as the European Pillar of Social Rights, and the Sustainable Development Goals. They should account for the resources needed to maintain high-quality, evidence-based continuity of care of people with other health problems and enable long-term care institutions to ensure better preparedness.
- **Ensure robust and equitable access to critical products and services for all EU citizens and demonstrate global solidarity.** This involves pre-emptively providing fair criteria for the allocation, among and within Member States, of limited resources essential to manage a pandemic and mitigate harm, with due regard to the moral equality of all persons.
- **Encourage Member States to strengthen public health infrastructure as an essential part of efficient and equitable health services**, for example by creating interoperable and interconnected health information systems; developing rapid and reliable testing and tracing systems supported by laboratory networks and monitoring capabilities; building public health workforce capacity; and strengthening community infrastructures of social care.
- **Establish systems for effective risk communication and tackling disinformation and misinformation during crises**, and strengthen the ECDC's role also in this regard. Develop communication strategies for advice and policy that are evidence-based, fit for purpose, flexible and nuanced and that counter stigmatising and homogenising discourses that serve to exclude and marginalise.
- **Together with EU Member States, develop strategies to sustain education in all sectors** and in accordance with the Digital Education Plan 2021-2027. The closure of educational institutions touches on several key

areas of society and has long-lasting social, economic, medical and psychosocial consequences. It should be carried out with utmost restraint.

- **Encourage Member States to strengthen efforts in community involvement and organisation and support civil-society organisations**, providing a critical part of the intensified social and care work, during health crises and beyond.
- **Foster appropriate engineering and other controls in public buildings** to limit indoors infection risks for airborne diseases. Among them are sufficient and effective ventilation, particle filtration, air disinfection and avoiding air recirculation and overcrowding.

Uphold fundamental rights and strengthen social justice

- **Uphold highest standards in the protection of fundamental rights and civil liberties during pandemics.** In the rare case of encroachments on rights and liberties to limit harm and risks during pandemics they should be considered with utmost care, be explicitly limited in time, continuously reviewed and justified with respect to their necessity and proportionality and lifted as soon as possible.
- **Implement the European Pillar of Social Rights**, for example by extending social security benefits to workers in non-standard and precarious employment and updating policies towards an appropriate acknowledgement of the value of care work; by addressing housing security to protect people without homes and in poor housing conditions; and by mitigating educational, domestic, sexual and gender-based risks during a pandemic.

Find solidarity-based and sustainable ways of living

- **Take action in a crosscutting manner upon the increasing body of knowledge about unsustainable ways of living**, which also contribute to the emergence of epidemics and pandemics. This includes addressing the links between health crises and environmental degradation and acting upon them in related fields, such as environmental protection, food, transport and urban planning. It also includes addressing the links between health crises, poverty and structural inequalities and acting upon them in related fields, such as employment, housing, social and economic aspects of ageing, gender and migration.

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