

# Toward a Global Pandemic Strategy

By JOANNA NURSE

**P**ANDEMICS cause panic, fear, and chaos. We have seen this pattern unfold repeatedly across the world with waves of the COVID-19 pandemic rippling through our populations. When humans are stressed, we tend to close doors and borders to protect ourselves, make impulsive decisions, be suspicious of others, and even deny the situation.

In the past, when travel and human interactions were relatively slow, this instinct served to protect families and communities from new infectious diseases such as the plague. However, in today's complex and globalized world, with large and mobile populations, these instincts do not serve us well, and we need to find alternative solutions.

To be able to do so, we need to recognize the frailty of being human, and our intrinsic and biological links with the health of animals and our planet. We are all interconnected, and the health of all relies on valuing the health of each and every one of us, including the animals that we depend upon and live side by side with. Aside from honest reflection, combined with objective evaluation to understand why the world is in such chaos, we need to also learn from the many successes and stories of compassionate action that every community and country brings to guide us forward.

There is a clear need for a global strategy, as the panic caused by the pandemic has permeated political leadership and the ability of multilateral agencies to provide a clear pathway out of this chaos.

The COVID-19 pandemic has already had a devastating impact upon the global economy, with an estimated loss of US \$10 trillion or 4.3 percent of the GDP for 2020-2021, according to a report by the World Bank. Inequalities within communities, and across and between countries are widening around the world. They are visibly evidenced by vaccine nationalism – with low-income countries receiving just 0.2 percent of all COVID-19 shots given, and a significant drop in life expectancy in many parts of the world.

This represents a significant threat to our wider global security. Aside from the very real threat of death,

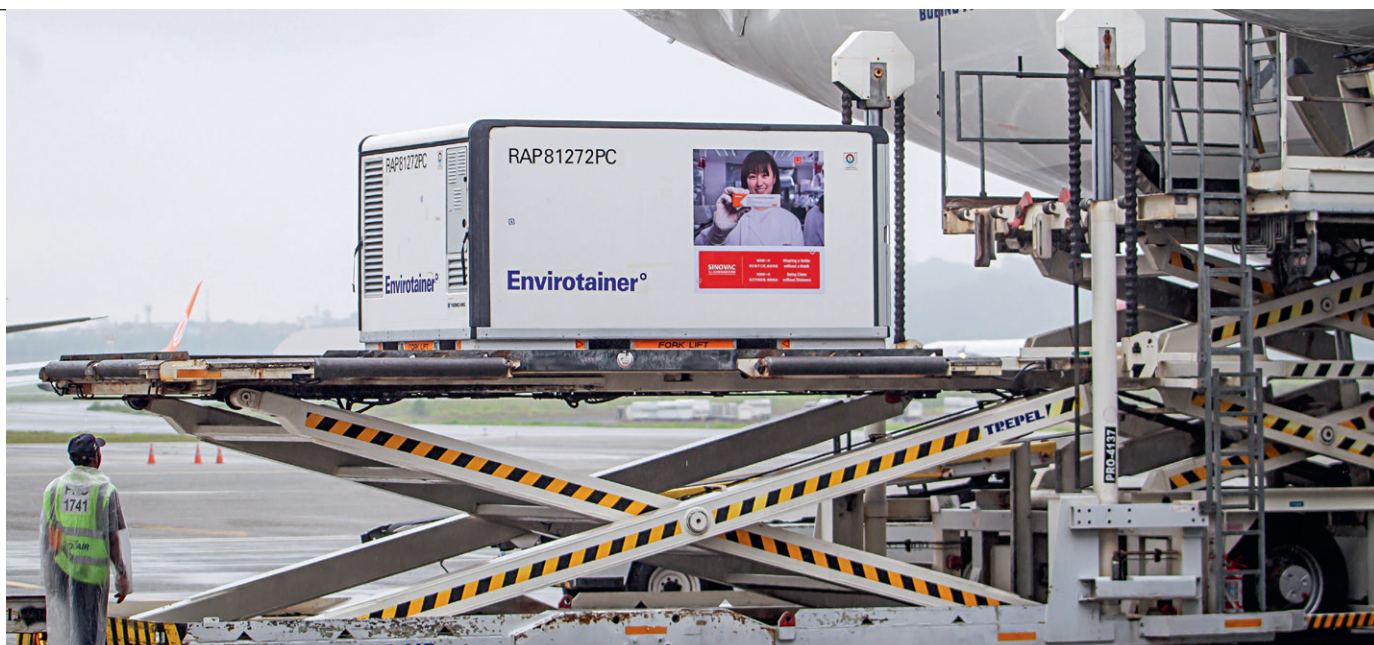
the pandemic has impacted our basic needs, including income and food security, resulted in civil unrest, and risked the collapse of nation states.

Inequalities are also increased by the global response to the pandemic, which has been overly dominated by political and nationalist agendas within high-income countries and coalitions such as the G7. The dominant narrative and pandemic response from many of these countries is driving the pandemic everywhere to an endemic scenario, which risks further pandemic waves with the emergence of new COVID-19 variants that our vaccines are not effective against.

With the Delta variant, vaccine coverage – or the level of herd immunity – is estimated to be in the range of 70-85 percent of the total population, and due to waning immunity after five to six months, booster doses are required. High-income countries may be able to ride these further pandemic waves if they keep ahead with new vaccines; however the reality of supply and roll-out of vaccine programs has proved to be challenging even in countries with comprehensive health systems, let alone those with minimal infrastructure.

The global focus has so far been on a single-issue solution, dominated by vaccines; when in reality the complex nature of the pandemic requires a strategic framework that allows a flexible multi-solution, multi-country coordinated response. Focusing primarily upon vaccines and achieving an endemic steady state risks the emergence of new variants. This approach will inevitably result in high death rates and overwhelm health services, especially in countries that are unable to protect their populations with vaccines. Aiming for a steady endemic state threatens the health of everyone on our earth. None of us are safe until we are all safe.

Moreover, the economic impact of not achieving global vaccination, as low- to middle-income economies continue to not have adequate access to COVID-19 vaccines, has been estimated to cost the global economy up to US \$9.2 trillion, and high-income countries up to US \$4.5 trillion, according to a study commissioned by the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC) Research Foundation. Furthermore, the impact upon international trade and travel is substantial, with



A shipment of 120,000 COVID-19 vaccine doses from China arrives in Sao Paulo, Brazil on November 19, 2020.

an estimated loss of more than US \$4 trillion to the global GDP for the years 2020 and 2021, a report by United Nations Conference on Trade and Development shows. Even if one country has good vaccine coverage, it experiences a sluggish recovery if its trading partners are not vaccinated.

Ultimately, bringing this pandemic to an end will require heroic and collaborative leadership, driven by values and an ambitious vision to create a safe and secure world where all can flourish. The InterAction Council has been working with experts and partners to achieve such a vision, and by drawing upon our collective learning, has formulated the Global Strategy and Recovery Plan.

It builds upon guiding principles to navigate uncertainties, including an emphasis on addressing risks, and valuing all people from all communities and countries as a basis for a global strategy.

The flexible framework builds upon successful pandemic responses from around the world, and presents a range of measures that enhance our ability to increasingly control the pandemic.

The health, security, and economic risks of our current national and global approach to the pandemic clearly underline the need to enhance a strategic and coordinated global response. Additionally, we need to apply emerging lessons from independent reviews that highlight the need to strengthen international governance mechanisms, combined with ensuring robust public health systems – from local to global. In particular, we need to identify solutions to prevent pandemics in the future, for example through the establishment

of a global health threats council. Modernizing the architecture of the UN Security Council to include a committee for global health threats could provide such a solution.

We may never fully understand the origins of this pandemic. However, China has applied what it has learned from its early experiences, and has largely succeeded with its ambitious elimination strategy. Going forward, China has the potential to play a significant role in bringing this pandemic to an end and strengthening our future global health security. Public data show, as of the end of September 2021, China has exported 1.7 billion doses of vaccine to other countries, compared to Europe, which has committed to delivering 250 million doses to low- and middle-income countries, the U.S.A. 500 million doses, and India 66 million doses.

In particular, there are many successful lessons about the application of public health interventions that China is able to share and help bring to scale across the world, combined with innovation and investment.

Moreover, China can draw upon its deep cultural values of the interconnectedness of human and planetary health, and display courageous leadership. These attributes will guide the establishment of a coordinated, collaborative, and accountable governance mechanism to prevent future health threats and provide a basis for a secure and healthy world for all. ■

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