
Humankind totally not ready for global pandemic, emergency preparedness group warns

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A sudden lethal pandemic could wipe out tens of millions of people, destroy the world's economies, and leave humanity in chaos, according to a new report from an emergency preparedness body that isn't alarmist in the slightest.

Citing a reactionary "cycle of panic and neglect" in which health emergencies are dealt with as they arise, rather than before they start, the Global Preparedness Monitoring Board – an entity formed last year by the World Bank and the World Health Organization – has called for immediate and massive investment in emergency preparedness systems in its first-ever report, titled "A World At Risk."

"The world is not prepared for a fast-moving, virulent respiratory pathogen pandemic," the report, posted on Tuesday, warns, claiming that such a crisis would kill off 50 to 80 million people – 2.8 percent of the population – ravage the global economy and trade, and "destabilize national security." Countries must "be prepared for the worst," if they want to avoid getting crushed by the next pandemic.

The other six "urgent actions" governments are advised to take mostly consist of throwing money at the problem, according to the report. "Heads of government must commit and invest," "countries and regional organizations must lead by example" (so that reluctant and/or poor countries are persuaded to commit and invest), "all countries must build strong systems" with those investments, "financial institutions must link preparedness with financial risk planning" i.e. budget for spending lots of money on preparedness, "development assistance funders must create incentives and increase funding for preparedness," and "the UN must strengthen coordination mechanisms" so the money gets to the right place.

The report repeatedly reminds countries that they've adopted the International Health Regulations, a binding 2005 agreement that already requires them to report any "public health emergency of international concern" to the WHO and step up their domestic preparedness infrastructure, and lambastes them for not implementing those regulations to satisfaction. Epidemics, it reminds these wayward nations, have a nasty tendency to exceed national borders –

especially when “countries, terrorist groups, or scientifically advanced individuals create or obtain and then use biological weapons that have the characteristics of a novel, high-impact respiratory pathogen.”

Amid all this fearmongering, the report still finds time to lament that “trust in institutions is eroding,” thanks to “misinformation that can hinder disease control communicated quickly and widely via social media.”

On the bright side, “preparedness is not a very costly investment,” Dr. Alexander Ross, director of the GPMB secretariat, told the Telegraph, adding that such an investment “is immediate and has additional benefits of increasing trust.”

The GPMB was devised following the 2014-2016 Ebola epidemic in West Africa, the deadliest outbreak of that disease in history and one in which sluggish action by the WHO played a major part in the high death toll. In the midst of another such epidemic, Ross has called for a “shift in paradigm in how we think about preparedness,” pointing out that even with a vaccine and new drugs to treat Ebola, the outbreak is not under control.
