

Covid-19, Foreign Policy, and Human Rights event - 7 December 2021: Report

Speakers

- María Fernanda Espinosa Garcés (Member of the Lancet Commission on Covid-19 and former President of UN General Assembly).
- Dr David Nabarro CBE (Special Envoy on Covid-19 for the World Health Organisation).
- Mandeep Tiwana, Chief Programmes Officer at CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation.

Moderator: Natalie Samarasinghe, Chief Executive Officer, UNA-UK

This event, over a year in the planning, was conceived under the working title ***“Covid-19 and future global pandemics – tragedy for the world, calamity for the poor. Why next time we must act together and through the UN.”*** We assumed then that a full return to normality would be shortly on the cards.

The meeting we eventually held was worth the wait and offered unique insights into how decisions at the UN (and WHO) are taken. A nice contrast to the usual soundbite guff we get via a national media news feed.

In her introduction, Natalie Samarasinghe highlighted the misery that the pandemic had inflicted on ordinary people with reports of gender-based violence, and human rights abuses from all corners of the globe. Covid had been a tragedy for our economies and for the global system more generally. She praised those who had developed the vaccines but noted with concern that Covax had not received anywhere near the number of donations it was promised. She believed that Covid vaccines should be declared a global public benefit and made available to everybody free at the point of use.

Dr David Nabarro stated that Covid 19 was the toughest of all challenges because it required learning on the job whilst at the same time seeking to manage an ongoing crisis. The world had not been prepared as Covid could not be handled like another Flu or Ebola outbreak. The SARS outbreak of 2002-4 was its closest comparator. Incomplete information left Governments (and WHO) struggling in the early days of the pandemic.

So, what have we learned? It is that Covid 19 is here to stay. It is endemic. We can expect localised spikes from time to time and more variants. How virulent they will be, only time will tell.

The vaccines' arrival was as a latter-day miracle, but vaccinations cannot be used alone to wish away the pandemic when it has yet to run its course. Supplementary measures are needed with a focus on those most at risk. Dr Nabarro recommended continued mask-wearing in enclosed spaces, good ventilation, and social-distancing linked to localised suppression strategies backed up by contact tracing.

He stated also that it was not enough for UN member states to focus on their own people and revealed that one of the reasons WHO declared a global pandemic in the first place was due to a perceived failure by member states to respond to its earlier warnings about the scale of the threat.

He reiterated concerns expressed earlier in the week by Europe's WHO regional Director Dr Hans Kluge that vaccine mandates should be "a very last resort." We learned the next day that the UK Prime Minister planned to hold a 'national conversation' about vaccine passports, noting that other countries have already gone further along that road which is deeply troubling from a human rights perspective.

María Fernanda Espinosa Garcés opened by highlighting the issue of vaccine hoarding by western nations which controlled over 90% of vaccine distribution. This situation is exacerbated by the inadequacy of health systems globally and the geopolitical tensions that often impacted on health decisions.

She stressed that there was already a wealth of research, analysis, and ideas on how to tackle long term health crises, but they had been left to gather dust over the years. "We need transformational change in global governance, underpinned by collective and consolidated multilateral action" she said. A good starting point would be the UNSG's [Our Common Agenda](#) which urges, among other things, greater autonomy for WHO and the deployment of technical advisers to help countries address health emergencies.

On the question of vaccine roll out, she identified intellectual property rights as a particular obstacle for developing countries (i.e., sharing of technical knowledge to enable the local manufacture of vaccines) and suggested that these rules might need to be relaxed for the greater good.

Mandeep Tiwana provided a useful civil society angle, quoting the findings of the [Civicus 2021 State of Civil Society Report](#). The pandemic had further aggravated and embedded existing structural inequality with modern economies organised that a fortunate few can become incredibly wealthy overnight whilst millions of others go to bed hungry.

Covid pandemic management affords both risks and opportunities with the key risk being that we continue doubling down with current policies with diminishing impact. The main opportunity is that we use the experience of the crisis to rethink our entire approach.

A worrying development since the pandemic began has been the rise in xenophobia, blaming migrants for spreading the virus and some member states have sought to use the pandemic as a justification for crackdowns on political opponents. He feared that like the failure of the recent Glasgow climate change conference, we were reverting to business as usual.

He noted that many states were willing to countenance an international, rules-based approach on matters of commerce but shy away from applying international human rights frameworks. States currently involved in Covid decision-making have been slow to protect personal freedoms, employing tools such as censorship, propaganda and rigidly enforced lockdowns.

He noted also that market forces have been unable to solve the crisis. Monetised access to public services now dominates the way western economies operate. The United Nations, now seventy-five years old, would need, he argued, a revamp with greater focus on people-centred multilateralism. The true power of civil society was

its ability to lay bare the fault lines of a country's decision makers, sharing his personal wish-list based on returning to the values of the UN Charter, and a human-rights-based approach across the whole spectrum of global concerns.

Questions and discussion

Many of those who had registered submitted questions and observations but there was no time to respond to all these, but UNA-UK committed to providing responses as part of its follow up work.

Some comments related to governments slow response in the delivery of vaccines to Covax in the promised numbers and the renewed focus on vaccinating children and healthy adults was neither right nor fair. There was deep anger at the recent decision by western countries to ban flights from Nigeria and South Africa over Omicron, especially when it was more than likely that the variant emerged from Europe.

In terms of the proposed new global health accord. Dr Nabarro stressed that a new WHO treaty with enforcement powers and a formal reporting process will take several years to put in place. Ms Espinosa Garcés explained that the World Health Assembly's special session had given the go ahead to consider a new global accord by 2024 "if needed". It was suggested that the cost of the new supporting infrastructure would be no more than that of a mid-size district hospital in New York. A review process on Covid under the existing global health treaty was already underway.

What can UNAs do?

The UNAs can speak candidly to authority, particularly to their own Governments and explore issues that UN officials cannot do. When people get angry at the UN or a UN agency such as the WHO, UNAs are there to remind people that the **UN** is primarily the member states and that it is on them that any pressure for reform needs to be focussed. It was vitally important for civil society groups actively to engage in that process.

Dr Nabarro pointed to UN successes such as the various international Human Rights instruments that are available to it and the UN Sustainable Development Goals which can have a real influence for the good.

In giving the vote of thanks, Patricia Rogers, Chair of UNA's London and South East Regional Council spoke of her concern at having received a Covid booster before many vulnerable people in the developing countries had received even a first vaccine, prompting her to make a donation to [Vaccinaid](#), an example others might follow.

