

Elders warn against bilateral pandemic deals that could impact multilateral cooperation

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The Elders caution that bilateral agreements giving access to pathogen data could fragment multilateral arrangements for pandemic preparedness and response, which are needed to keep all people safe from future threats.

Several countries are being approached to sign long-term bilateral agreements that make giving access to pathogen samples and genetic sequencing data a condition for resuming global health assistance. These arrangements include commitments that access to specimens can be retained for up to 25 years. To date, there is no assurance that countries providing this data would receive timely sharing of the benefits, including the vaccines, therapeutics, and diagnostics developed from it.

This development comes as World Health Organization member states continue negotiations on a pathogen access and benefit-sharing annex to the Pandemic Agreement adopted in May. These negotiations have principles of equity and solidarity at their core.

Parallel systems created through bilateral agreements should not undermine the foundations of global preparedness and response being built at the multilateral level. Once multilateralism is hollowed out, it is hard to rebuild.

The Elders support the objectives of the Accra Reset, which encourage countries to assert health sovereignty. Bilateral agreements that do not pair pathogen access with benefit-sharing would be unlikely to advance that goal. Coordination within and across regions could help ensure that any engagement on pathogen data reinforces fair access to life-saving countermeasures. Where bilateral arrangements are considered, full participation in the multilateral system for data access and benefit-sharing should be maintained.

Decisions taken now will determine whether the world can build a future of shared safety and collective action, and whether all people are protected from pandemic threats.

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Media enquiries

William French, Head of Communications

T: +44 7795 693903

media@theElders.org

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