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Cost of protection against pandemics is small

A new post-Ebola report challenges the world to invest the funds and take the actions needed to stave off the threat posed by pandemics to lives and economies. John Maurice reports.

The west African Ebola epidemic, whose tragic enormity took the world by surprise, has jolted the global health community to find a way of preparing for and dealing with future events of this kind. Over the past year, groups of eminent experts have been working on at least six reports detailing why the world was unable to halt the epidemic before it spiralled out of control and what should be done in readiness to confront future epidemics. The most recent report, launched on Jan 13 in New York, NY, USA, was crafted by a 17-member Commission on Creating a Global Health Risk Framework for the Future (GHRF).

The report is titled *The neglected dimension of global security*. Speaking to *The Lancet*, Peter Sands, chair of the Commission, explains why. "Most reports that follow disease outbreaks consider only the health dimension and result in limited action. Our report shows the threat pandemics pose to global security, in terms of lives and economic stability. Framing the problem in this way stands a better chance of provoking action." Sands is senior fellow at the Mossavar-Rahmani Center for Business and Government at Harvard Kennedy School, MA, USA.

The GHRF Commission estimates that every year on average infectious disease outbreaks cost the world about US\$60 billion, an estimate likely to increase as the number of annual outbreaks increases as a result of population growth and globalisation of trade and travel. Recent years have seen at least six large-scale outbreaks—hantavirus pulmonary syndrome, severe acute respiratory syndrome, H5N1 influenza, H1N1 influenza, Middle East respiratory syndrome, and Ebola virus disease, which killed more than

11 000 people and cost the world more than \$2 billion, according to World Bank calculations.

Two of the published reports were commissioned by WHO Director-General Margaret Chan. A third, which was published in *The Lancet*, was produced by experts convened by Harvard University, MA, USA, together with the London School of Tropical Medicine, UK. The GHRF report was produced with support

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from eight sponsors, including the Ford Foundation, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the Wellcome Trust. Two more reports are still in the works, one commissioned by the UN Secretary-General, the other by WHO.

The recommendations of the published reports all cover much the same ground—strengthen countries' public health systems and infrastructure, improve coordination of pandemic preparedness among the different players, and boost research and development on vaccines, diagnosis, and other tools needed to cope with disease outbreaks.

The GHRF report is the only report that puts a price tag on its recommendations. The world, it estimates, will have to fork out an additional \$4.5 billion each year to protect against infectious diseases. This sum, the report points out, is only a fraction of the \$60 billion that is being lost every year on average from

pandemics and epidemics. Much of the required \$4.5 billion would come from countries' domestic funds. Sands explains: "Lower-income countries will require support from international sources, but they should plan to increase reliance on domestic resources over time in order to ensure the long-term sustainability of their commitment to outbreak preparedness."

One recommendation common to all four reports is the creation, within WHO, of a new, independent centre dedicated to infectious disease preparedness and response—a recommendation linked, no doubt, to WHO's widely criticised inadequacy in dealing with the Ebola epidemic. All the published reports, including that commissioned by WHO's Director-General, referred to this criticism. Bruce Aylward, WHO's special representative for the Ebola response, welcomes the GHRF report. "For one thing", he tells *The Lancet*, "it mentions in a constructive way the problems we faced in the early days of the Ebola epidemic. And we agree that there needs to be a single programme or centre, with a high-level leadership able to oversee the broad spectrum of infectious disease emergencies."

"Our Director-General is going through all the reports coming in and will present her thinking on the new centre to the WHO Executive Board in a few days. She will also lay out a number of transformative changes in the way WHO faces problems of readiness, preparedness, and response to emergencies. The big message we take from these reports is the need for WHO to expand its current mandate as a technical norms-and-standards organisation to include the operational capacity needed to manage emergencies."

John Maurice



Bryan Denton/Corbis

For the GHRF report see <http://www.nap.edu/read/21891/chapter/1>

For the Harvard-LSHTM report published in *The Lancet* see *Lancet* 2016; 386: 2204–21