



Figure 5: Cumulative COVID-19 cases by country as of 11 March 2020

Source: World Health Organization Coronavirus (COVID-19) Dashboard. Data as of 21 April 2021.

On 30 January 2020, it should have been clear to all countries from the declaration of the PHEIC that COVID-19 represented a serious threat. China had reported upwards of 20 000 confirmed or suspected cases and 170 deaths. The number of countries to which the virus had spread and where local transmission was occurring was growing by the day. Even so, only a minority of countries set in motion comprehensive and coordinated COVID-19 protection and response measures – a handful even before seeing a confirmed case, and the remainder once cases had arrived.

The question we must ask ourselves is why the PHEIC declaration did not spur more action, when the impending threat should have been clearly evident? After a stuttering start to the global response in January 2020 by the end of that month it was clear that a full-scale response would be needed. **It is glaringly obvious to the Panel that February 2020 was a lost month**, when steps could and should have been taken to curtail the epidemic and forestall the pandemic.

The Panel's analysis suggests that the failure of most countries to respond during February was a combination of two things. One was that they did not sufficiently appreciate the threat and know how to respond. The second was that, in the absence of certainty about how serious the consequences of this new pathogen would be, "wait and see" seemed a less costly and less consequential choice than concerted public health action.