

4.3 Early responses lacked urgency and effectiveness

The declaration of a PHEIC by the WHO Director-General on 30 January 2020 was not followed by forceful and immediate emergency responses in most countries, despite the mounting evidence that a highly contagious new pathogen was spreading around the world. For a strikingly large number of countries, it was not until March 2020, after COVID-19 was characterized as a “pandemic”, and when they had already seen widespread cases locally and/or reports of growing transmission elsewhere in the world, and/or their hospitals were beginning to fill with desperately ill patients, that concerted government action was finally taken.

In recommending the declaration of a PHEIC on 30 January, the WHO COVID-19 IHR Emergency Committee stated its view that it was “still possible to interrupt virus spread, provided that countries put in place strong measures to detect disease early, isolate and treat cases, trace contacts and promote social distancing measures commensurate with the risk”⁽³⁸⁾. Most countries did not seem to get that message, despite the fact that, at the time, cases had been reported in 19 countries and human-to-human transmission was reported in at least four countries in addition to China. The majority of reported cases outside China had a history of travel in China, but that was partly because testing was initially directed only at those who both had symptoms and had recently travelled from Wuhan.

Figure 4: Cumulative COVID-19 cases by country as of 30 January 2020

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

