

4.2 A virus moving faster than the surveillance and alert system

The earliest possible recognition of a novel pathogen is critical to containing it. The emergence of COVID-19 was characterized by a mix of some early and rapid action, but also by *delay, hesitation, and denial*, with the net result that an outbreak became an epidemic and an epidemic spread to pandemic proportions.

The Independent Panel has consulted widely in order to develop a meticulous and verified *chronology* of events as they took place from the end of 2019 when cases were first detected in China through to the end of March 2020, by when the outbreak had spread extensively worldwide and had been characterized as a pandemic. Inputs to this chronology have included a systematic review of all the relevant published studies – both those that were available at the time and retrospective studies; submissions from WHO Member States, interviews with key actors in China and other countries, with WHO and other organizations; and a review of internal documents and correspondence from WHO.

The intention of the Panel in examining in detail the steps taken to respond to COVID-19 is not to assign blame, but rather to understand what took place and what, if anything, could be done differently if similar circumstances arise again, as they almost certainly will. We are conscious that our judgements benefit from the wisdom of hindsight and acknowledge that the decisions made at the time were made in conditions of great uncertainty.

Figure 3: A short segment of the authoritative chronology of the Independent Panel

Source: The Independent Panel for Pandemic Preparedness and Response

