



4. What happened, what we've learned and what needs to change

The Panel has carefully reviewed each phase of the present crisis in order to establish facts and draw lessons for the future.

4.1 Before the pandemic – the failure to take preparation seriously

In under three months from when SARS-CoV-2 was first identified as the cause of clusters of unusual pneumonia cases in Wuhan, China, COVID-19 had become a global pandemic threatening every country in the world⁽¹¹⁾. Although public health officials, infectious disease experts, and previous international commissions and reviews had warned of potential pandemics and urged robust preparations since the first outbreak of SARS, COVID-19 still took large parts of the world by surprise. It should not have done. The number of infectious disease outbreaks has been accelerating, many of which have pandemic potential.

It is clear to the Panel that the world was not prepared and had ignored warnings which resulted in a massive failure: an outbreak of SARS-CoV-2 became a devastating pandemic.

The fast-moving SARS epidemic had shaken the world in 2003. While the epidemic only lasted some six months and was responsible for 8096 cases and 774 deaths⁽¹²⁾, it was judged by the WHO Regional Director for the Western Pacific to have “caused more fear and social disruption than any other outbreak of our time”⁽¹³⁾. SARS was a novel coronavirus causing respiratory disease. It travelled rapidly to 29 countries, territories and areas, and debilitated health systems, with many health workers being infected. Even so, expert observers knew that, with SARS, the world had dodged a bullet—screening and isolation could readily contain its spread, because people with SARS did not transmit the virus until several days after showing symptoms and were most infectious when symptoms were most severe. It was understood that if a new fast-moving pathogen were transmissible in the absence of symptoms, it would pose a much deadlier challenge.

The SARS epidemic was followed by the 2009 H1N1 influenza pandemic, the 2014–2016 Ebola outbreak in west Africa, Zika and other disease outbreaks, including another new coronavirus, Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS). These outbreaks were the impetus for a series of initiatives to strengthen health security, animated by the conviction that disease outbreaks and other health threats constituted a major global risk and required a web of actions across all countries.