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**THE ROLES OF SPECIFIC INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATION IN RESPONDING TO COVID-19 PANDEMIC GLOBALLY**

When governments put their nations first, corona virus cooperation falls short

Has the pandemic sidelined multilateral organizations? We’ve seen unilateral [border closures](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/europe-food-supply-coronavirus/2020/03/31/f0650808-729a-11ea-ad9b-254ec99993bc_story.html?itid=lk_inline_manual_2) and beggar-thy-neighbor [fights](https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2020/04/03/white-house-scrambles-scoop-up-medical-supplies-angering-canada-germany/?itid=lk_inline_manual_2) over medical equipment — and perhaps less news about the coordination and cooperation these organizations were created to foster.

The covid-19 pandemic has presented enormous political challenges to global cooperation, and organizations. In April, President Trump announced he would suspend funding to the [World Health Organization](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/04/14/trump-threatened-defund-who-that-could-leave-another-global-initiative-under-chinas-influence/?itid=lk_inline_manual_4) over allegations of mismanagement.

But international organizations play a vital role in the global response, and are still carrying out important tasks — where they can. Key organizations are coordinating international efforts, including [airlifting](https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2020/4/pdf/200401-factsheet-COVID-19_en.pdf) material and medical staff, managing transnational [research](https://www.who.int/teams/blueprint/covid-19) on the pandemic and sharing essential information and initiating [relief funds](https://unsdg.un.org/resources/secretary-generals-un-covid-19-response-and-recovery-fund).

Global bureaucracies are acting in the areas where they have most autonomy. But where the political stakes are highest for their members, and where their members have veto power, that cooperation is stalling. Here’s what you need to know.

**The WHO does more than issue recommendations**

Even before Trump took aim against the WHO, analysts had [criticized](https://www.cfr.org/blog/who-and-china-dereliction-duty) the WHO’s handling of the crisis, citing a lack of resolve vis-a-vis China and allegedly [politically tainted advice](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/04/13/who-needs-us-funding-weakening-it-will-undermine-global-response/?itid=lk_inline_manual_10). This criticism reflects the basic dilemmas of being a multilateral organization that has to deal with its membership. Evidence-based recommendations are politically risky when the question of how to obtain evidence — and what to count as evidence — has [political implications](https://www.ft.com/content/2a70a02a-644a-11ea-a6cd-df28cc3c6a68) for powerful members.

Countries have been less likely to comply than to complain when the WHO issues recommendations with controversial domestic consequences — for example, on [travel restrictions](https://www.who.int/news-room/articles-detail/updated-who-recommendations-for-international-traffic-in-relation-to-covid-19-outbreak) or widespread testing. However, the WHO does a lot more than issue recommendations. It has used its expert network to provide relevant information, issued over 50 pieces of [technical guidance](https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/technical-guidance), distributed medical equipment and test kits, established a [supply chain task force](https://healthwise.punchng.com/covid-19who-inaugurates-supply-chain-task-force/) in cooperation with the World Food Program, and supported countries’ capacities for preparedness and response by raising over $800 million through its [Solidarity Response Fund](https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/donate). It also supports [transnational research networks](https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/global-research-on-novel-coronavirus-2019-ncov/solidarity-trial-accelerating-a-safe-and-effective-covid-19-vaccine) that are trying to produce vaccines.

**The U.N.’s potential is hampered by great power rivalry**

The U.N. faces similar constraints from powerful member states. The U.N. General Assembly in early April adopted a resolution to ask for “[intensified international cooperation](https://apnews.com/7ebca40e0e9135b44459b99476077c1a)” and tasked Secretary General António Guterres to lead the effort. But to date, the U.N. Security Council hasn’t echoed this call. While the Security Council took action against past [HIV/AIDS](http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/doc/1308) or [Ebola](http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/doc/2177) epidemics, it now faces political tensions from its most powerful members, [China and the United States.](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-un/u-n-security-council-meets-over-coronavirus-as-it-struggles-to-act-idUSKCN21R3PB) China wants to push the Security Council to return to its focus on traditional security threats. The United States insists that any resolution should mention the origins of the virus, despite Chinese objections.

For weeks, the Security Council has been [negotiating](https://www.passblue.com/2020/04/30/estonia-to-deliver-high-tech-at-last-to-the-un-security-council/) a draft resolution on a global cease-fire during the pandemic. Without a concerted call for global solidarity among the world’s great powers, Guterres has focused on the need for “[science and solidarity](https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/04/14/834287961/u-n-chief-targets-dangerous-epidemic-of-misinformation-on-coronavirus?t=1587026559492),” and the U.N. has launched a new communication effort to counter [misinformation](https://twitter.com/antonioguterres/status/1250095790959267841?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1250095790959267841&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.npr.org%2Fsections%2Fcoronavirus-live-updates%2F2020%2F04%2F14%2F834287961%2Fu-n-chief-targets-dangerous-epidemic-of-misinformation-on-coronavirus) about the pandemic. And the U.N. also launched a [$2 billion global humanitarian response plan](https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/03/1060222) together with UNICEF and the WHO.

**The E.U. can act — but not on all issues equally well**

The European Union also has difficulty launching coordinated solutions that go beyond its bureaucrats’ competences and which require each member states’ consent — particularly with regard to economic and fiscal policies. There is German and Dutch opposition to “[coronabonds](https://voxeu.org/article/long-run-view-coronabonds-debate),” which could spread the cost of helping the hardest-hit countries — like Spain and Italy — across the E.U. This led the E.U. to settle for [less ambitious plans](https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/04/09/remarks-by-mario-centeno-following-the-eurogroup-videoconference-of-9-april-2020/) and lofty promises for economic recovery boosts after the crisis.

[*The risk of Sweden’s corona virus strategy? Blind patriotism.*](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/05/03/risk-swedens-coronavirus-strategy-blind-patriotism/?itid=lk_interstitial_manual_23)

The European Commission, the E.U.’s executive body, has been able to impose solutions in less politically controversial areas. Initially, it got the 27 E.U. members to agree on a common ban on travel from outside the E.U. and [suspended](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage_en/77754/The%20EU%E2%80%99s%20corona%20marathon%3A%20moving%20on%20all%20tracks) its Stability and Growth Pact rules to facilitate state aid. It has recently launched [SURE](https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/support_to_mitigate_unemployment_risks_in_an_emergency_sure_0.pdf), a temporary 100 billion euro unemployment support scheme and [redirected](https://www.euractiv.com/section/economy-jobs/news/covid-19-commission-paves-way-to-draw-e37-billion-from-structural-funds/) 37 billion euros of its budget to help its members with the covid-19 crises. The commission has also proposed a [coordinated exit strategy](https://www.euractiv.com/section/coronavirus/news/commission-to-call-for-a-coordinated-eu-exit-from-covid-19-lockdown/) from lockdown.

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**The African Union’s problem is resources**

The African Union, which fosters cooperation among its 55 members, has different problems — it [depends heavily on outside resources](https://au.int/en/pressreleases/20200412/african-union-chair-president-cyril-ramaphosa-appoints-special-envoys) for its activities. The virus has spread across the continent, where [testing capacities](https://www.ft.com/content/e9cf5ed0-a590-4bd6-8c00-b41d0c4ae6e0) remain limited. The chair of the A.U. Commission, Moussa Faki Mahamat, called the U.S. decision to suspend WHO funding “[deeply regrettable](https://twitter.com/AUC_MoussaFaki/status/1250375313135198208?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1250375313135198208&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.aa.com.tr%2Fen%2Fafrica%2Fafrican-union-slams-trump-decision-to-stop-who-funding%2F1805900).” Nonetheless, with the help of the WHO’s African office and the [World Bank](https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2020/04/03/in-the-face-of-coronavirus-african-countries-apply-lessons-from-ebola-response) as well as [lessons learned](https://au.int/fr/newsevents/27030/14-lessons-prepare-future-health-emergencies-au-support-ebola-outbreak-west-africa) from the [Ebola crisis](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/mar/07/we-learned-four-valuable-lessons-from-ebola-they-can-help-us-fight-the-coronavirus), the [A.U. has become](https://blog.prif.org/2020/04/07/an-island-of-internationalism-the-african-unions-fight-against-corona/) the main standard-setting body on the continent, building a common Corona virus Fund and sharing expertise among its members through its Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

[*Many Africans distrust their governments. How will that affect their corona virus response?*](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/05/01/many-africans-distrust-their-governments-how-will-that-affect-their-coronavirus-response/?itid=lk_interstitial_manual_29)

**Other international organizations take on more health-related tasks**

Perhaps surprisingly, other international organizations that have risen to the challenge are not generally involved in global health. [NATO](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_174855.htm?selectedLocale=en) and the [World Food Program](https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/04/1061662) are just two examples. They have transferred their airlifting capabilities to move vital medical equipment and staff as well as share information. NATO’s secretary general has also been [countering misinformation](https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/17/nato-cheif-rebukes-china-coronavirus-disinformation/), while WFP’s executive director has warned of a [hunger pandemic](https://www.wfp.org/news/wfp-chief-warns-hunger-pandemic-covid-19-spreads-statement-un-security-council).

International organizations have not prevented covid-19 from spreading. Nobody has. But their bureaucracies carry out their assigned responsibilities. And organizations whose business is normally not international health policy have stepped up and offered their services.

However, as government-led geopolitics push aside multilateral cooperation, it is becoming harder for countries to buffer the [social](https://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/2020/04/social-impact-of-covid-19/), [economic](https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v42/n08/adam-tooze/shockwave) and [political](https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2020/04/europe-hungary-viktor-orban-coronavirus-covid19-democracy/609313/) consequences of the coronavirus crisis. This places new pressure on all countries to devise governance schemes capable of stepping up a bolder global response to the next global health crisis. This is not the last pandemic we will face — and we may not have the same contingent of international organizations to help organize cooperation the next time around.