

PRINCE MAHIDOL AWARD CONFERENCE 2021

COVID-19: ADVANCING TOWARDS AN EQUITABLE AND HEALTHY WORLD

Message from the Co-Chairs of the International Organizing Committee

The COVID-19 pandemic has taken a huge toll on lives and livelihoods, disrupting health systems with impacts going far beyond the disease itself. It has impacted the progress with the Sustainable Development Goals, the global economy is in recession, pushing millions back into extreme poverty, and social and political fault lines have been exposed. It has worsened pre-existing inequities and has disproportionately affected the vulnerable and disadvantaged. These inequalities, poor governance, and the politicization of public health are putting people at risk. To date, the pandemic has claimed more than one million lives.

The International Health Regulations (IHR 2005) adopted by 194 countries in 2005 emphasized the need to develop core capacities for the detection, reporting, and control of health emergencies of international concern. Unfortunately, in many countries, COVID-19 unveiled a lack of capabilities to handle a health crisis of such magnitude, including in the wealthy ones, and highlighted the lack of sustained investment in the health sector and in preparedness. It provided us with a stark reminder of the importance of investing in strong public health systems, comprehensive primary health care and the role of health workers and other essential service providers. The pandemic has also brought to the fore the delicate relationship between people, animal and planetary health, a relationship that must be nurtured through a “One Health” approach.

COVID-19 will not be the last event of its kind. Epidemics in the 21st century are spreading faster and further than ever. But with the right political and financial investments, we can prevent and mitigate future pandemics and protect our future and the future of generations to come. As well, leveraging essential lessons from the other epidemics like AIDS can be applied to COVID to maximize impact.

The Global Preparedness Monitoring Board, in its 2020 report, laid out the lessons the world must learn and the concrete actions we can take to protect ourselves. In addition, several ongoing reviews of the response will shed light into the lessons we are learning; These include the Independent Panel for Pandemic Preparedness and Response, the IHR Review Committee and the Independent Oversight and Advisory Committee for the WHO Health Emergencies Programme.

As global health leaders, practitioners and reformers, we need to address the challenges highlighted by this pandemic. Below are a few approaches to stimulate the discussions:

- **Work together in solidarity:** The transborder nature of the virus means that it cannot be contained by any single sovereign state and highlights the need for collective actions and international cooperation working together in solidarity. Regional cooperation and multilateralism are essential at this time to ensure sharing of information and technology, and an equitable distribution of resources.



- **Communicate credibly and for the people:** Develop and shape messages based on science, public health, human rights and ethics. Strengthen strategic risk communication and community engagement, manage Infodemics by Infodemiology. Behavioural science, sociology and insights into IT and social media are increasingly becoming important for successful epidemic and pandemic management.
- **Invest in health systems:** Access to affordable health care for all and health security go hand in hand. No country can properly respond to this disease or to any other outbreak without a robust health system that provides access to essential health services for every person without causing financial hardship. This requires investments in resilient health systems, in preparedness and in essential public health functions such as primary care, with an emphasis on promoting health and preventing diseases. Such investments should build on the whole-of-government (multisectoral), whole-of-society (multi stakeholder) and health-in-all-policies approaches.
- **Address inequalities:** Migrant workers, refugees and asylum seekers, prisoners, indigenous communities, people of colour and ethnic minorities have especially borne the brunt of the crisis. Their needs can be met through addressing the social and economic determinants of health. Treatments, therapeutics and vaccines must be distributed equitably and go to the populations that need them the most. The Access to COVID-19 Tools Accelerator and the COVAX Global Vaccines Facility are there to ensure that if and when a vaccine is proven to be safe and effective, it will be accessible equitably for all countries.
- **Adopt a One Health approach** that addresses the links between human, animal and planetary health. We need to be far more effective in understanding and characterizing future threats and why they are still circulating in their natural wildlife hosts and use this insight to develop more proactive measures to prevent future spill over and to be able to respond more quickly and effectively should they emerge.
- **Build back Greener:** COVID-19 is giving us an opportunity to build back better with a new impetus to the need to respond to environmental and climate stresses. In May 2020, over 40 million healthcare workers issued a call to place climate-friendly initiatives at the heart of COVID-19 economic recovery. Both WHO and the European Union made proposals for actions towards a green recovery and UNDP has made it a central theme of its COVID response strategy, “Beyond Recovery: Towards 2030”. Actions such as the use of clean renewable energy, clean water, and sustainable food systems will reduce biodiversity destruction, protect fragile environments and respond to climate shocks and change.

This current pandemic is a crisis, but it also provides us with a window of opportunity to reflect, learn and build back better. During this conference, we invite you, as part of the global health community to join us, share lessons and provide feedback so we can lay a roadmap for a better-prepared, resilient and sustainable system for global health security. Together, we will do so through addressing three questions: (1) **What has the world learned from COVID-19?** (2) **What does a post-COVID-19 world look like?** and (3) **What should we do for the future?**

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Due to this global crisis, the original theme of the Conference this year has been changed from a focus on what is needed to achieve the SDGs in the remaining decade, to addressing the key gaps in global health, global health security as well as the social, economic and environmental determinants of health exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. This is a virtual six-day conference with one plenary session each day, live to all registered participants and recorded for access by global audiences. Prior to this main conference, a series of webinars took place to discuss different issues on four sub-themes. The plenary sessions planned this week are the synthesis sessions building on input from the webinar discussions. This conference will highlight approaches to advancing towards an equitable and healthy world and how the global community can prepare for future public health emergencies of international concern by learning from this pandemic and synthesizing lessons for future policies and actions on health systems, economic systems, political systems and environment and climate change.

As the Co-chairs of this crucial global Conference, we are delighted to welcome you to join more than a thousand fellow health leaders, practitioners and reformers around the world, and to take full advantage of all the opportunities that PMAC 2021 has to offer.

Appreciation

We would like to acknowledge the valuable contribution of the co-sponsoring organizations, whose tireless efforts helped bring the Conference to fruition. We especially thank the Prince Mahidol Award Foundation and the Royal Thai Government for their remarkable support and outstanding leadership, as well as the PMAC Secretariat for providing their overall guidance, day-to-day support and incredible team spirit. We are also grateful to the organizers and contributors to the webinar series that have provided the excellent analyses and input used in this week's plenary sessions.

Finally, we would like to show our appreciation and solidarity to all frontline workers all over the world who have bravely put themselves in harm's way in the service of others.



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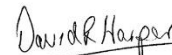
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