

The World Is Unprepared for the Next Pandemic¹

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Six years ago, on March 11, 2020, Tedros Adhanom, Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO), declared that the institution had elevated COVID-19 to a pandemic. It was one of the most defining and dramatic events of the first 25 years of the 21st century and permanently transformed the world—not only during the period in which it was active, but also after its official end was declared on May 5, 2023. The way people and entire communities live changed completely and forever.

It is now understood that the pandemic was not merely the circulation of a virus among billions of people, which killed millions and left lasting sequelae in many others. Its emergence was driven by intertwined environmental, economic, social, and political factors that facilitated its rapid and devastating spread and that, regrettably, continue to haunt the world.

Recent reports from respected global institutions reveal an almost complete fading from memory—or even denial—of the pandemic that swept the world six years ago, as well as a deterioration of the conditions that enabled and sustained the emergence of COVID-19.

Political conditions have worsened with the weakening of multilateralism represented by the United Nations, as well as with the United States' withdrawal from the WHO and from other vital UN agencies and agreements, such as the Paris Climate Agreement and dozens of others.

Inequalities of all kinds—social, economic, and environmental—are creating a caste-like global society: a handful of ultra-rich individuals alongside billions of people and families living in extreme poverty, who are more vulnerable to events such as pandemics and other emergencies, as shown in recent reports by Oxfam International and by the research group led by Thomas Piketty.

Environmental conditions have also deteriorated, according to the seventh edition of the Global Environment Outlook by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), along with the expansion of the overexploitation of the planet's environmental resources and the worsening of the “triple planetary crisis”: climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution of the air, land, and rivers, lakes and oceans.

In the realm of global health governance, the WHO's authority as the world's health body has been under attack by powerful actors such as the United States, while

¹ Originally published in Portuguese by the Brazilian newspaper 'O Globo', in the March 11, 2026, p. 3

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the Pandemic Agreement and the revised International Health Regulations (IHR) have stalled in their approval and implementation, hindered from the outset by political disagreements.

Official development assistance and health aid are in extremely dangerous decline, due to the elimination or weakening of aid agencies from traditionally donor countries, as in the case of the United States through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and of Europe, which is reducing investments in development and health while expanding military spending.

Preparedness and response initiatives, such as the 100 Days Mission and the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI), warn of growing difficulties of all kinds in achieving their goals of producing diagnostics, medicines, and vaccines in a timely manner.

In conclusion, the conditions that led the world into the COVID-19 pandemic have worsened. Precisely for this reason, this deeply negative scenario must be addressed with urgency.

The world's most powerful countries must assume their responsibilities toward the planet. Countries and peoples of the Global South must be heard in their calls for reforms in international forums, but they must also mobilize effective South–South cooperation to find solutions to their own challenges. Social movements must join forces to pressure the political sphere for the necessary transformations.

Without a renewed commitment to multilateralism, sustainable development, and social justice, the world is, in practice, playing with fire. The warning signs are clear. The question is whether we are willing to act before the flames spread once again.