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A global health action agenda for the Biden administration

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Joe Biden will assume the US presidency at a time of unprecedented global health crises, with the COVID-19 pandemic and major setbacks in reducing poverty, hunger, and disease. The COVID-19 pandemic offers rare opportunities for the US President-elect to spearhead long-overdue structural changes and revitalise global health leadership. Building trust among global partners will be challenging, given the USA's withdrawal from, and disruption of, international cooperation under the presidency of Donald Trump. The USA will have to lead in a different, more collaborative way.

The COVID-19 pandemic is currently the world's greatest challenge. The incoming administration should mobilise partners to fund the UN COVID-19 Global Humanitarian Response Plan (GHRP), designed to coordinate health and economic action in vulnerable countries. So far, the UN has received only 40% of the US\$9.5 billion GHRP goal for 2020.¹ To gain high-level political support, the Biden administration will need to press for a UN Security Council resolution on COVID-19, modelled on the 2014 resolution on Ebola virus disease as a threat to peace and security.

Biden must also strengthen WHO, not only for the response to COVID-19, but also for the full gamut of health challenges, ranging from maternal, child, and adolescent health to injuries, non-communicable diseases, and universal health coverage. Addressing health inequities will be crucial in all these domains. WHO's \$5.8 billion biennial budget—about the size of a large US hospital—is incommensurate with its global mandate. WHO, moreover, controls less than a quarter of that inadequate budget, with most funds already earmarked. The Biden administration should coordinate with other member states to submit a World Health Assembly resolution doubling mandatory contributions to WHO.

Placing WHO in the vortex of geopolitical tensions, as has occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, is destructive and the USA must not cause or add to the politicisation of WHO. Member states, including the USA, should pledge to maintain the scientific integrity and political neutrality of WHO. The Biden administration can press for necessary WHO reforms, including more inclusive governance and civil society participation.

COVID-19 has revealed major weaknesses in the International Health Regulations (IHR) 2005. The incoming US administration should support IHR reforms. In our view, the IHR must protect the confidentiality of unofficial data sources while making credible data public. The IHR should also empower the WHO Director-General to declare an intermediate level for public health emergencies of international concern. Importantly, we believe the IHR should more clearly define states' international assistance responsibilities to build core health-system capacities.²

Another urgent issue for the incoming administration will be to help provide equitable worldwide distribution of COVID-19 vaccines. The USA should join the 189 countries participating in the COVID-19 Vaccine Global Access (COVAX) Facility.³ COVAX aims to ensure that 92 low-income and middle-income countries equitably access COVID-19 vaccines.⁴ The USA, working with partners, should fund the \$5 billion COVAX Advance Market Commitments⁵ to incentivise mass scale-up of vaccine production and procure vaccine doses,⁶ along with providing additional funds for distribution.

Vaccine nationalism is a major challenge. Even before the full regulatory approval of any COVID-19 vaccine candidates, confirmed purchases by individual countries cover 6.8 billion doses, with another 2.8 billion doses under negotiation or reserved. Low-income countries hold no prepurchase agreements,⁷ and are reliant on COVAX.



COVAX has signed agreements for only 700 million doses of COVID-19 vaccines⁷ of a targeted 2 billion doses by 2021.⁸ President-elect Biden will need to launch international negotiations to redistribute a substantial portion of national COVID-19 vaccine purchases to COVAX, while also supporting immunisation education campaigns to increase coverage.

Beyond the pandemic itself, COVID-19 has unleashed vast economic, social, and health crises. Disruptions to health services because of COVID-19 might lead to an estimated extra 1.5 million AIDS, tuberculosis, and malaria deaths in 2020 alone.⁹ Child vaccination campaigns have stalled, even as measles deaths increased by 50% from 2016 to 2019.¹⁰ The polio eradication campaign has also been disrupted. Maternal and child deaths are projected to rise sharply.¹¹ The World Food Programme (WFP) projects a doubling of children and adults facing acute hunger globally by the end of 2020.¹²

The US Congress should dedicate 2% of COVID-19 emergency relief spending to global humanitarian assistance.¹³ With lower-income countries facing crushing debt service burdens, the incoming US administration should support the extension of a multiyear debt service moratorium for these countries. Going further, debt cancellation would increase funds needed to mitigate COVID-19's long-term health and socioeconomic effects.

With compound health crises worldwide, UN humanitarian appeals face record shortfalls. The Biden administration could build on the tradition of US humanitarian leadership by funding at least 40%—the USA's share of high-income country gross national income¹⁴—of UN and WFP appeals.

The USA has developed innovative global health policies, which have languished under President Trump. The incoming administration should restore US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) funding for surveillance, data analysis, and health worker training in lower-income countries. CDC's China office, for example, was cut from 47 to 14 staff under the Trump presidency.¹⁵ Overall, US relationships are frayed, not only with China but also other key allies.

The US Congress should also fund and re-energise the global health security agenda, designed to strengthen and evaluate national health-system capacities globally. Rectifying President Trump's damaging decisions, we urge the Biden administration to re-establish the White House National Security Council Directorate for

Global Health Security and Biodefense and relaunch the PREDICT virus identification and tracking project. The incoming administration should also fully replenish the US Strategic National Stockpile of medical supplies to prepare for the next health emergency.

The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the importance of therapeutic countermeasures. To accelerate access to scientific advances, the incoming administration will need to increase domestic research and development funding by at least \$1 billion annually, as the National Academy of Medicine has recommended.¹⁶ Globally, the USA could offer increased support to the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI), which funds platform technologies to rapidly respond to high priority infectious disease threats. Furthermore, President-elect Biden should break with previous administrations by encouraging liberal use of Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) flexibilities and avoid TRIPS-plus trade agreements, which make essential medicines unaffordable.¹⁷

Beyond COVID-19, the world faces life-threatening challenges, with antimicrobial resistance and the climate crisis, among the most urgent. Antimicrobial resistance threatens our ability to treat common infections. The Biden administration should enhance stewardship of antimicrobials, regulating agricultural and medical use, while incentivising pharmaceutical and biotech companies to develop new antimicrobials and supporting multilateral efforts to confront antimicrobial resistance.

Climate change adversely affects social and environmental determinants of health, including clean air, safe drinking water, food, and secure shelter.¹⁸ President-elect Biden plans to rejoin the Paris Agreement on climate change,¹⁹ working with partners to regulate greenhouse gas emissions, while creating economic incentives for green technologies. Environmental stewardship and advancing planetary health should be priorities for the incoming administration.

Our proposed Biden action agenda is undoubtedly ambitious, but will reap huge benefits. COVID-19 has shown that US interests are inextricably tied to global health security. New disease outbreaks anywhere pose threats everywhere. Healthier and safer populations are more stable and economically productive. This is the time to revitalise US global health leadership, after a ruinous retreat from global solidarity under the Trump administration. International cooperation

on the compound crises of COVID-19 could become a model for tackling other existential global hazards. Out of a crisis comes opportunities to build a safer, healthier, and more just world.

LOG is Director of the WHO Collaborating Centre on National and Global Health Law. MAH serves on the GAVI Board and the Scientific Advisory Council of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, chairs the Joint Coordinating Group of CEPI, is Co-chair of the WHO Expert Advisory Committee on Human Genome Editing, and receives an honorarium for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation work; the other activities are unpaid. BRB reports personal fees from *The New England Journal of Medicine*, outside the area of work discussed here. DES, JPK, BKR, and MAW declare no competing interests.

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