

Did the WHO Lose its Footing During COVID-19?

**KAS Webinar Series: Effects of COVID-19 on the
Global Political Order**

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Short history of WHO

- International cooperation for health started in 1851
- International Health Office in 1908
- League of Nations in 1920 after WWI
- Current WHO formed in 1948 in the aftermath of WWII
- Leadership, coordination and technical support re health
- Arbiter of norms, best practices and policies on health





Achievements

- Eradication of smallpox in 1980
- WHO's vaccine campaigns drastically cut the global incidence of and deaths from measles and many other childhood diseases.
- Global Polio Eradication Initiative: polio has been reduced by more than 99 percent, eradicated in Africa in August 2020
- Leads fight against HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other infectious diseases
- Leading fight against non-communicable diseases such as cancer, diabetes
- Provides framework for regulation of harmful

The background features the WHO logo on the left, which is a stylized globe with human figures in various colors (blue, green, orange, pink, purple) holding hands. To the right, the text 'COVID-19 RESPONSE' is displayed in a large, light blue font, with 'RESPONSE' being significantly larger and bolder than 'COVID-19'.

WHO's Response to COVID19

- Declared COVID-19 a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) on January 30th
- Declared Pandemic in March
- Adopted a COVID-19 testing protocol for use across the globe
- COVID-19 Technology Access Pool (C-TAP): effort to produce open-access tests, vaccines, and treatments
- COVAX: to accelerate the development and manufacture of COVID-19 vaccines, and to guarantee fair and equitable access

Criticism of WHO Response

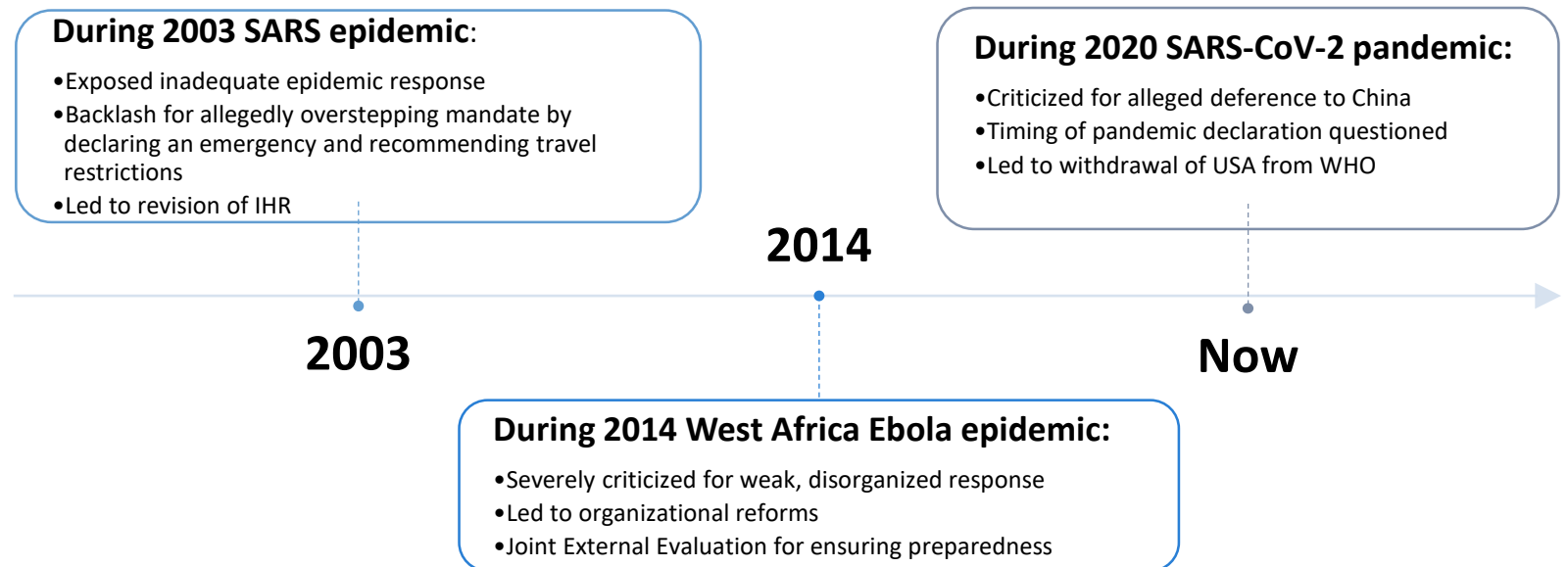
- Political: WHO's handling of China during COVID
- Technical: Conflicting and/or delayed guidance:
 - Delay in declaring pandemic
 - Risk of indoor airborne transmission
 - Universal mask wearing mandate
- Consequence:
 - Calls for investigation from USA & Australia
 - Demands for reform
 - USA pulled out of the WHO effective July 2021



SARS WARD
VISITOR'S
NOT ALLOWED



WHO has been
here before



Has WHO has been set up to fail?

- Lack of independence & inherently political:
 - governance by member states with interests
 - reliant on voluntary funding
- WHO has limited authority to ensure state compliance with the policy guidelines or the IHR:
 - constrained ability to independently verify official state reports
 - cannot punish countries for not reporting data quickly and accurately
- Funding:
 - dependent on voluntary contributions allocated according to donor interests
 - only 21.6% percent of its budget under WHO control



Recommendations for the future

- Take global health seriously: Understanding the importance of a democratically governed global health organization in ensuring global security
- Increase independence:
 - Funding: Assessed/committed funding should constitute at least 2/3 of WHO funding
 - Inclusivity: overcome geopolitical pressure to be inclusive of all countries & territories for global health security
- Empower:
 - IHR should be legally binding with consequences for delayed/false reporting, balanced with incentives for early reporting
 - WHO should be empowered to respond to and act on sources deemed credible outside of member states
 - WHO should be supported to mount investigations in hostile countries in case of suspected outbreaks of international concern

Conclusion

- WHO was forged in the delicate post-war era as an organization backed by and with membership across all countries in the world
- WHO is uniquely positioned to lead and coordinate the world's response to COVID-19 and other global health threats
- Has trusted relationships with govts around the world
- Not perfect
- We should take the occasion of every epidemic to assess and respond to the gaps in strengthening WHO's response to be better prepared for the next one

