

WHO's Contributions, Challenges and Countermeasures Under the COVID-19

Wang Xinyu^{1,*}

¹ *Department of International Relations, Sichuan University, Chengdu, China*

**wxy05161229@163.com*

ABSTRACT

As an agency that directs and coordinates world health affairs, the World Health Organization (WHO) plays an important role in maintaining international health security. However, since 2020, the outbreak and continued spread of COVID-19 has caused a serious international public health crisis and a serious threat to the safety and health of all mankind. As the most important intergovernmental international organization in the field of health, the response and management of the COVID-19 crisis by WHO has attracted much attention, but it has also been questioned. This essay summarizes a series of measures taken by WHO in response to COVID-19, and analyzes the role played by WHO in the management of the COVID-19 crisis from three aspects: leadership, guidance and coordination. Next, the essay analyzes the challenges for WHO to play its role in the context of COVID-19. Finally, the essay provides some suggestions for WHO's efforts to deal with COVID-19, so as to make WHO play a more effective role in the global health governance system. The purpose of this essay is to help understand WHO's role in the international community through specific events, so as to have a more comprehensive understanding of WHO, and also to provide reference for global COVID-19 prevention and control.

Keywords: *WHO, COVID-19, International organizations.*

1. INTRODUCTION

World Health Organization (WHO) was founded in 1948. It is the guiding and coordinating agency for international health issues in the United Nations system. It is responsible for leading global health affairs, formulating norms and technical standards, providing policy recommendations, and conducting health monitoring and assessment. Over the past 70 years, WHO has actively assisted member states to achieve national goals and deal with health issues by convening the World Health Assembly, issuing public health plans and action plans, and providing technical support. These have made outstanding contributions to the prevention and control of infectious diseases, maternal and child health, chronic diseases and other aspects, and have helped all mankind to achieve better health.

The COVID-19 crisis is a sudden and global international public health crisis, which has caused great harm to people's lives and social economy. The spread, speed and severity of the epidemic have also brought unprecedented challenges to the management of international public health crises. The professionalism and neutrality of WHO have also been questioned by

many countries. However, after summarizing WHO's activities under the epidemic, this essay argues that during the COVID-19 crisis, a series of response measures implemented by WHO in the fields of leadership, analysis, communication, research and prevention have actually achieved certain results. These measures demonstrate its role of leadership, guidance and coordination in the management of international public health crises. But the spread of the epidemic has exposed some shortcomings in WHO's response to global health risks, and effective measures need to be taken to resolve them. Therefore, the essay combines the current situation of COVID-19 to analyze the challenges for WHO in responding to global public health crises, and proposes countermeasures and suggestions with reference significance. It is hoped that while having a more objective and clear understanding of the role of WHO, it also provides a reference for the prevention and control of global epidemics, which makes the essay more practical.

2. THE ROLE AND CONTRIBUTION OF THE WHO UNDER THE COVID-19

2.1. Provide authoritative management

As the largest intergovernmental health organization in the international community, the World Health Organization has enjoyed a leading position in the field of health since its birth. WHO's authoritative sources include mandates from member states, technical expertise and the ability to take effective action. In the management of the COVID-19 crisis, the leadership role played by the WHO has been fully demonstrated.

First of all, WHO has taken various forms to release authoritative and professional information, including holding press conference and releasing global epidemic statistics. A cluster of COVID-19 cases was reported from 30 to 31 December 2019 in Wuhan, China. On 1 January 2020, WHO immediately activated its incident management support team to inform the world of the situation, and on 10 January issued comprehensive guidance warning of the potential spread of the virus. At this time, it was in the early stage of the outbreak, and fewer than 100 confirmed cases were reported outside China. It can be seen that long before the outbreak of the new coronavirus pandemic, the WHO has urged the world to prepare. Secondly, at the beginning of the COVID-19, WHO quickly established an emergency committee to lead the deployment and actions related to epidemic prevention and control. At the same time, WHO has also strengthened its ties with various UN departments and other intergovernmental country organizations such as the World Bank. WHO could focus on the health crisis, while other agencies could help alleviate the humanitarian or socio-economic development problems caused by the outbreak. Finally, WHO led the response to the COVID-19 crisis through the Health Emergency Programme. The Health Emergency Programme was developed at the request and with the approval of WHO member states, which can help to respond more effectively to COVID-19. WHO hoped that governments and departments of all countries would strengthen a unified response and work on the priorities of public health.

2.2. Provide professional guidance

In the COVID-19 crisis management, WHO has given full play to its normative function and authority in health technology, and provided scientific risk warnings, measures and recommendations on diagnosis and treatment standards for the global epidemic prevention and control, which reflects its professional advantages.

To begin with, WHO conducted a risk assessment of the COVID-19 crisis. In the early stages of the outbreak, WHO convened an emergency committee to assess whether the outbreak constituted a public health

emergency of international concern. From 16 to 24 February, WHO sent professionals to China, where the outbreak occurred earlier, to conduct inspections so as to obtain first-hand information. Then WHO wrote a report about the evolution of the outbreak in China. On 30 January, the emergency committee reconvened, and advised that the outbreak constituted a public health emergency of International concern. WHO warned that all countries should be prepared for containment [1]. As the epidemic continued to heat up in various countries, Tedros Adhanom emphasized on February 24: "Whether to use the term 'pandemic' to describe an epidemic depends on the geographical spread of the virus, the severity of the disease and its impact on the entire social impact assessment." This showed that the WHO pursued a scientific and fact-based assessment to properly manage the international public health crisis and avoid unnecessary panic.

Second, WHO provided policy advice to member states on combating infectious diseases. Since the outbreak of the COVID-19, WHO has quickly dispatched relevant experts to countries with more severe epidemics to conduct scientific investigations, and cooperated with local governments to enhance understanding of the epidemic. By analyzing specific situations, WHO provided standardized guidance and targeted policy recommendations for countries. This was to ensure that countries have clear goals and are able to take the necessary steps and actions when developing or updating plans. At the same time, WHO has provided global standards and recommendations for countries around the world to take scientific, reasonable and appropriate anti-epidemic measures in terms of travel, trade, isolation, monitoring and treatment.

Finally, WHO has formulated professional technical specifications for the international community to respond to the COVID-19 crisis. On 10 January 2020, WHO released a set of guidance documents just 10 days after the COVID-19 outbreak began [2]. WHO has also launched a global research and development roadmap for COVID-19 to coordinate and facilitate information sharing on research elements. The roadmap aimed to achieve two goals: first, timely diagnosis and optimal care for those affected by the outbreak in the near future, while innovative integration across research areas; Second, support research priorities in the medium to long term to promote the development of a sustainable global research platform to prepare for the next outbreak [3]. Since then, WHO has released a total of more than 100 relevant technical documents. These guidance documents have accelerated the development and use of technologies such as diagnosis, vaccines, and treatments, helping countries around the world better respond to the epidemic.

2.3. Provide resource allocation and coordination

Since the outbreak of the COVID-19, WHO has actively coordinated multiple resources and played its role as the world's largest health cooperation platform to raise funds and gather scientific research forces to fight COVID-19. WHO also promoted communication and cooperation between various countries and multilateral partnerships. The coordination role of WHO is mainly reflected in the following aspects:

First, WHO provided a financing platform to respond to the COVID-19 crisis by raising funds. To better assist countries in their response to COVID-19 through financing, WHO, together with the United Nations Foundation and the Swiss Philanthropy Foundation, launched the COVID-19 Solidarity Response Fund [4], which provided channels for direct contributions from organizations, individuals and groups around the world. In response to the obstruction of international trade and the global economic downturn, WHO has also worked with the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund to assess the potential economic impact of the COVID-19, formulate mitigation strategies, and propose policy options.

The second is to concentrate international efforts to find effective measures for the treatment of COVID-19 virus. On the one hand, to accelerate the development, production and equitable distribution of COVID-19 vaccines, diagnostic tools and treatment tools, WHO actively coordinated with global partners such as France, Germany and the Bill Gates Foundation to announce the launch of the landmark "Access to COVID-19 tools accelerator" on 24 April. In addition, WHO also coordinated clinical trials of vaccines on a global scale, and sponsored the "Solidarity Trial" international clinical trial project with partners. On the other hand, WHO has delivered protective equipment, testing reagents and other materials to countries in need, and has actively cooperated with governments and manufacturers to ensure supply. On 3 March, the WHO released a Strategic Preparedness and Response Plan to help protect those countries with weaker health systems [5]. With the help of WHO, countries in Africa and America with weak health systems are also able to carry out coronavirus testing.

The third is to convene international cooperation forums and mobilize all sectors of the international community. On 11 February 2020, WHO convened a global research and innovation forum to mobilize the international community to respond to the COVID-19 crisis. Outstanding scientists, public health agencies, and ministries of health from various countries are brought together to formulate a global research agenda, and set priorities and frameworks. "WHO is playing an important coordinating role by bringing together the scientific

community to identify research priorities and accelerate progress." said WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus. At the special summit of the G20 leaders in response to the COVID-19 held on March 26, Tedros further pointed out that the international community should continue to strengthen unity and jointly guide the global production of medical supplies, vaccines and therapies to avoid the expansion of the crisis.

3. CHALLENGES FACING THE WHO UNDER THE COVID-19

From the above discussion, it can be seen that, in general, WHO has played a very important role in preventing and controlling the COVID-19 outbreak by acting quickly to provide preparedness and response plans and providing timely assistance to affected countries. However, the increasing number of confirmed cases and affected countries and regions around the world also shows that WHO still faces major challenges in responding to global public health emergencies. This essay argues that it mainly includes the following aspects:

3.1. The reduced willing of some countries to cooperate has undermined WHO's leadership

WHO is supposed to be a leader in global health governance, but in recent years it has been marginalized. The 2014 Ebola outbreak was even seen as an example of a crisis in its global health leadership [6]. If countries only pursue the maximization of self-interest and only want to enjoy rights but not assume obligations, it will be difficult for WHO to play a leading role. For example, some of the actions of the United States in this outbreak have undermined WHO's global health leadership. In April 2020, President Donald Trump criticized WHO for its inadequate response to the epidemic and announced that the United States would suspend funding to WHO. On July 6, 2020, the U.S. government notified the United Nations that the United States will officially withdraw from WHO from July 6, 2021. There is no doubt that the actions of the United States will not only cause WHO to face a bigger funding gap, but also undermine cooperation between countries under the existing global governance system and make financing for global health governance more difficult.

3.2. WHO's capacity to respond to public health emergencies remains inadequate

The COVID-19 has evolved into a global pandemic in a short period of time, which indicates that WHO still has some deficiencies in the implementation of global health surveillance. The most significant challenge is the lack of a global data framework that can facilitate countries to share data and information quickly and efficiently [7]. The WHO pointed out that there is still no unified public health reporting mechanism that allows

public health agencies and service agencies to directly transmit information to WHO. The lack of such a mechanism hinders the sharing of data and reduces WHO's ability to respond to public health emergencies. Besides, judging from this outbreak, the current WHO public health surveillance system is still insufficient in detecting and reporting new infectious diseases. In particular, surveillance systems for specific diseases lack the ability to monitor health conditions more extensively.

3.3. The rules for global health governance are not effective enough

The International Health Regulations (2005) are important legal tools for global health governance and provide a framework for WHO's epidemic prevention and rapid response. In general, on the basis of following the IHR (2005), the various norms and guidelines put forward by WHO in response to the epidemic should be universally observed and implemented by all members. However, in the fight against COVID-19, there are still some countries violating the IHR (2005). Article 7 of the IHR (2005) requires the sharing of health data and information during emergencies or unusual public health events, and WHO has issued policy statements on data sharing on several occasions. But during the epidemic, for various reasons, countries failed to fully share relevant data [8]. On February 26, 2020, the WHO Director-General pointed out: "One of the biggest challenges we face is that too many affected countries still have not shared data with WHO." In addition, the WHO Director-General has repeatedly called for travel and trade restrictions not to be adopted, but many countries have not followed this advice to varying degrees. In February 2020, 16 health law scholars wrote in the *Lancet* that some countries have imposed travel restrictions on China in violation of the International Health Regulations (2005), which reflected the lack of effectiveness of global governance rules.

4. CONCLUSION

Since its establishment, WHO has played an important role in the early detection and warning of infectious diseases, coordination of prevention and control strategies, sharing of diagnosis and treatment methods, and organization of international assistance. It has also made an outstanding contribution to the establishment of a global public health emergency mechanism for risk sharing and safety sharing. At present, the COVID-19 epidemic is still spreading around the world, causing great threat and damage to the lives and health of people around the world and posing great challenges to global public health security. Although WHO has also been criticized during the COVID-19 outbreak, it needs to be objectively recognized that WHO still plays an indispensable role in coping with the spread of global infectious diseases and reducing the negative

impact of the epidemic. Therefore, countries in the world should unite and support WHO to play a leading role, accelerate the improvement of the international public health crisis management system, and promote the stable development of global health governance.

REFERENCES

- [1] Kennedy, Merrit. (2020) "WHO Declares Coronavirus Outbreak A Global Health Emergency". <https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2020/01/30/798894428/who-declares-coronavirus-outbreak-a-global-health-emergency>.
- [2] Amanda Watts and Veronica Stracqualursi. (2020) "WHO defends coronavirus response after Trump criticism". <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/04/08/politics/who-responds-trump-claims-coronavirus/index.html>.
- [3] WHO, (2020) "A Coordinated Global Research Roadmap: 2019 Novel Coronavirus". <https://www.who.int/publications/m/item/a-coordinated-global-research-roadmap>.
- [4] WHO, (2020) "WHO, UN Foundation and partners launch first-of-its-kind COVID-19 Solidarity Response Fund". <https://www.who.int/news/item/13-03-2020-who-un-foundation-and-partners-launch-first-of-its-kind-covid-19-solidarity-response-fund>.
- [5] WHO, (2020) "WHO Timeline-COVID-19". <https://www.who.int/news/item/27-04-2020-who-timeline---covid-19>.
- [6] Gostin, L. and Friedman E. (2014) "Ebola: A Crisis in Global Health Leadership", *The Lancet*, 384: 1323-1325.
- [7] David Held, et al. (2019) "Gridlock, Innovation and Resilience in Global Health Governance.", *Global Policy*, 10(2): 1758-1899.
- [8] Legge David G, et al. (2020) "COVID-19 response exposes deep flaws in global health governance", *Global Social Policy*, 20(3): 1177.