

# Priorities for the COVID-19 pandemic at the start of 2021: statement of the *Lancet* COVID-19 Commission

The *Lancet* COVID-19 Commission calls for three urgent actions in the COVID-19 response (our broader overview is available on our website). First, all regions with high rates of new COVID-19 cases, including the USA and the European Union (EU), should intensify measures to minimise community transmission alongside rapid deployment of COVID-19 vaccines. Second, governments should urgently and fully fund WHO and the Access to COVID-19 Tools (ACT) Accelerator,<sup>1</sup> including COVAX. Third, the G20 countries should empower the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and multilateral development banks to increase the scale of financing and debt relief. Success on all three priorities—containment of transmission, rapid vaccination, and emergency finance—will require improved global cooperation.

The high rates of community transmission (>100 new COVID-19 cases per million per day)<sup>2</sup> in the USA, Europe, South Africa, and other countries show the emergence of new variants of SARS-CoV-2, such as lineage B.1.1.7 in the UK,<sup>3-7</sup> 501Y.V2 in South Africa,<sup>8</sup> and additional variants emerging in California, USA,<sup>9,10</sup> and in Brazil.<sup>11,12</sup> New lineages are increasing transmission of infection and raising risks in regions that have been less affected by COVID-19, including in sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>13-15</sup> Additionally, acquired immunity from earlier COVID-19 infections might be less protective against reinfection with some of the new SARS-CoV-2 variants.<sup>16</sup> Mutant lineages might also reduce the

efficacy of COVID-19 vaccines and require adapted vaccines or boosters.<sup>17,18</sup> The numbers of new COVID-19 cases in east Asia and the Pacific (<10 new cases per million per day in most countries) have been consistently below those of Northern America and Europe. The lower numbers of COVID-19 cases in these countries result from the successful implementation of comprehensive containment measures: border restrictions and other limits on movement; behavioural changes including widespread use of face masks and physical distancing; active surveillance by public health systems, including mass testing, backward tracing (to identify the sources of outbreaks), and forward tracing (to identify the contacts of new cases); and the quarantine of all suspected cases and the use of facility-based isolation of confirmed cases

of COVID-19. The USA and the EU failed to implement such comprehensive measures, and there was generally excessive decentralisation of containment efforts across the 50 US states and 27 EU members in 2020. Lack of centralised coordination undermined control of COVID-19, not least because of interstate travel in the USA and intercountry travel in the EU.<sup>19</sup> Both the USA and EU need to step up more top-down coordination in 2021. Stronger health systems that incorporate universal health coverage and community-based health workers are vital in the response to COVID-19. At least half of the world's population lacks access to essential health

services.<sup>20</sup> Strengthening community-based and gender responsive health systems will be essential to implement inclusive and comprehensive COVID-19 immunisation campaigns.

The global roll-out of COVID-19 vaccines to date is neither inclusive nor adequately planned. COVAX has targeted immunisation coverage of at least 20% of the population in each participating country by the end of 2021,<sup>21</sup> and has contracted for 2 billion doses of COVID-19 vaccines. Yet the timely supply of vaccines to COVAX is in question, as high-income countries (HICs) step to the front of the queue for limited supplies of COVID-19 vaccines. As of Feb 9, 2021, 148.08 million COVID-19 vaccine doses had been delivered, of which 115.67 million were delivered in the USA (43.21 million), and 40.52 million in China (40.52 million),



Published Online  
February 12, 2021  
[https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(21\)00388-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(21)00388-3)

For the *Lancet* COVID-19 Commission overview see <https://covid19commission.org/enhancing-global-cooperation>



noting that it is in the interest not only of LMICs but also of the entire world to suppress the pandemic as rapidly as possible.<sup>24</sup>

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the revenues of governments have plummeted at a time when higher government spending is urgently needed.<sup>25</sup> As a result, the need for emergency deficit financing is unprecedented. HICs are able to finance large deficits by borrowing in the capital markets together with open-market operations by the central banks that partly monetise the new debt. If LMICs run deficits and open-market operations equivalent as a share of gross domestic product to those in the USA and Europe, most LMICs would incur steeply rising interest rates, depreciating currencies, and high inflation. Thus, while HICs are running huge budget deficits,<sup>26</sup> the poorest countries are reducing investment spending to make room for urgent social spending.<sup>27</sup> Even worse, many of the poorest countries cannot cover the costs of urgent social needs.

The IMF and multilateral development banks (the World Bank and regional development banks) were created for such emergencies. In 2020, the IMF lent about \$105.5 billion of emergency financing to 85 countries.<sup>28</sup> We welcome the possibility of a new allocation of Special Drawing Rights (SDRs), the reserve currency of the IMF. As the IMF supplements the international reserves of IMF member states, a new SDR allocation would be particularly important for countries that face balance of payment shortfalls in the context of COVID-19 and could be mobilised in innovative ways to increase the financing capacity for COVAX. If an additional SDR allocation of about \$650 billion were agreed, the amount available to LMICs would be of significant macroeconomic benefit. The multilateral development banks should similarly be

supported to substantially increase long-term financing of infrastructure to ensure that COVID-19 does not derail the Sustainable Development Goals and other development objectives, such as mass electrification with renewable energy and universal access to digital technologies.

Now more than ever the multilateral system must be supported to work effectively to deliver know-how and COVID-19 vaccines, therapeutics, and other vital supplies (eg, personal protective equipment and COVID-19 test kits) to all nations. Multilateral cooperation should include technical training and cooperation, active sharing of best practices, and the full deployment of international policy instruments, including emergency multilateral financing, flexibilities under the WTO-TRIPS agreement, and active cooperation in global institutions, including WHO, the ACT Accelerator, and COVAX.

LA reports grants from the Sustainable Development and Solutions Network related to this Comment and grants from the Global Happiness Council, unrelated to this Comment. JA reports personal fees from consulting for companies and organisations across many sectors regarding COVID-19 risk reduction strategies: K-12 schools, universities, child-care centres, homeless shelters, commercial real estate, industry, biotech, finance, entertainment, media organisations, faith-based organisations, courts and prisons, and government and has only accepted consulting fees from for-profit organisations, unrelated to this Comment. KSR is a member of the Executive Group of the International Steering Group of the WHO SOLIDARITY Trial (Therapeutics), Chair of the WHO Guidelines Development Group on Hypertension Treatment, and is a member of the WHO EMRO Commission on the Social Determinants of Health. PD reports a grant from Johnson & Johnson to one of EcoHealth Alliance's scientists to conduct work analysing deforestation and health patterns in southeast Asia and this work is unrelated to this Comment and PD is a member of the WHO team investigating the origins of COVID-19 in China but is acting in his own personal capacity as a volunteer and is considered an independent scientist acting as a temporary expert adviser to WHO for the period of the work and his involvement in the Comment has no relationship to the work conducted for WHO. PH and MEB are developers of a COVID-19 vaccine construct, which was licensed by Baylor College of Medicine to Biological E Ltd, a commercial vaccine manufacturer for scale-up, production, testing, and licensure. VG is an employee of the International Monetary Fund (Director of the Fiscal Affairs Department). All other authors declare no competing interests. The authors' views

*members of the Lancet COVID-19 Commission†, Commission Secretariat and Staff of the Lancet COVID-19 Commission†*  
**sachs@columbia.edu**

\*Commissioners of the *Lancet* COVID-19 Commission: Jeffrey D Sachs (University Professor, Columbia University, USA [Chair]), Salim Abdool Karim (Capriza Professor for Global Health in Epidemiology, Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University, USA), Lara Akinin (Distinguished University Professor, Simon Fraser University, Canada), Joseph Allen (Associate Professor of Exposure Assessment Science, Harvard T H Chan School of Public Health, USA), Kirsten Brosbøl (Founder, Parliamentarians for the Global Goals, Denmark), Gabriela Cuevas Barron (Minister of Parliament, Mexican Congress, Mexico), Peter

and opinions in this Comment do not necessarily represent the views, decisions, or policies of the institutions, universities, or health systems with which they are affiliated.

*\*Commissioners of the Lancet COVID-19 Commission, Task Force Chairs and*

Daszak (President, EcoHealth Alliance, USA), María Fernanda Espinosa (former President of the UN General Assembly and former Minister of Foreign Affairs and Defense, Ecuador), Vitor Gaspar (Director of the Fiscal Affairs Department, IMF, USA), Alejandro Gaviria (President, Universidad de los Andes and former Minister of Health, Colombia), Andy Haines (Professor of Environmental Change and Public Health, London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, UK), Peter J Hotez (Dean of the National School of Tropical Medicine, Baylor College of Medicine, USA), Phoebe Koundouri (Professor, School of Economics, Athens University of Economics and Business, Greece and President-Elect of the European Association of Environmental and Resource Economists, Greece), Felipe Larrain B (Professor of Economics, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile and former Minister of Finance, Chile), Jong-Koo Lee (Professor, Seoul National University and Former Director, Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, South Korea), Muhammad Pate (Julio Frenk Professor of Public Health and Leadership, Harvard T H Chan School of Public Health, USA), Paul Polman (Founder, Imagine.one and Former Chief Executive Officer of Unilever, UK), Gabriela Ramos (Assistant Director General for Social and Human Sciences, UNESCO, France), K Srinath Reddy (President, Public Health Foundation of India, India), Ismail Serageldin (Founding Director, Bibliotheca Alexandrina, Egypt), Rajiv Shah (President, Rockefeller Foundation, USA), John Thwaites (Chair, Monash Sustainable Development Institute, Australia), Vaira Vike-Freiberga (Former President, Republic of Latvia), Chen Wang (President, Chinese Academy of Medical Sciences, Peking Union Medical College, and Director, National Clinical Research Center for Respiratory Diseases, China), Miriam Khamadi Were (Vice Chair, The Champions of AIDS-Free Generation, Kenya), Lan Xue (Cheung Kong Chair Distinguished Professor and Dean, Schwarzman College, Tsinghua University, China), and Min Zhu (former Deputy Managing Director of the IMF and former Chair of the Bank of China). †Task Force Chairs and members of the *Lancet* COVID-19 Commission: Maria Elena Bottazzi (Associate Dean of the National School of Tropical Medicine, Baylor College of Medicine, USA), Francesca Colombo (Head of the Health Division at the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, France), and George Laryea-Adjei (Director, Evaluation Office, UNICEF, Somalia). ‡Commission Secretariat and Staff of the *Lancet* COVID-19 Commission: Yanis Ben Amor (Assistant Professor of Global Health and Microbiological Sciences, Executive Director, Center for Sustainable Development, Columbia University, USA), Ozge Karadag Caman (Research Scholar, Center for Sustainable Development, Columbia University, USA), Guillaume Lafortune (Senior Economist, United Nations Sustainable Development Solutions Network, France), Emma Torres (Vice President for the Americas and Head of the New York Office, United Nations Sustainable Development Solutions Network, USA), Ismini Ethridge (Special Assistant to the Director, Center for Sustainable Development, Columbia University, USA), and Juliana Bartels (Special Assistant to the Director, Center for Sustainable Development, Columbia University, USA).

- 1 WHO. What is the ACT-Accelerator. 2020. <https://www.who.int/initiatives/act-accelerator/about> (accessed Feb 9, 2021).
- 2 Ritchie H, Ortiz-Ospina E, Beltekian D, et al. Statistics and research: coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19). Our World in Data. 2021. <https://ourworldindata.org/coronavirus> (accessed Feb 9, 2021).
- 3 Davies NG, Barnard RC, Jarvis CI, et al. Estimated transmissibility and severity of novel SARS-CoV-2 variant of concern 202012/01 in England. *medRxiv* 2020; published online Dec 26. <https://doi.org/10.1101/2020.12.24.20248822> (preprint).
- 4 Volz E, Mishra S, Chand M, et al. Transmission of SARS-CoV-2 lineage B.1.1.7 in England: insights from linking epidemiological and genetic data. *medRxiv* 2021; published online Jan 4. <https://doi.org/10.1101/2020.12.30.20249034> (preprint).
- 5 Mahase E. Covid-19: what have we learnt about the new variant in the UK? *BMJ* 2020; **371**: m4944.
- 6 WHO. SARS-CoV-2 variant—United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. *Disease Outbreak News*, Dec 21, 2020. <https://www.who.int/csr/don/21-december-2020-sars-cov2-variant-united-kingdom/en> (accessed Feb 9, 2021).
- 7 Chand M, Hopkins S, Dabrera G, et al. Investigation of novel

- SARS-CoV-2 variant. Variant of Concern 202012/01. Technical briefing document on novel SARS-CoV-2 variant. Public Health England, January, 2021. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/investigation-of-novel-sars-cov-2-variant-variant-of-concern-20201201> (accessed Feb 9, 2021).
- 8 Tegally H, Wilkinson E, Giovanetti M, et al. Emergence and rapid spread of a new severe acute respiratory syndrome-related coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) lineage with multiple spike mutations in South Africa. *medRxiv* 2020; published online Dec 22. <https://www.medrxiv.org/content/10.1101/2020.12.21.20248640v1> (preprint).
  - 9 County of Santa Clara Emergency Operations Center. COVID-19 variant first found in other countries and states now seen more frequently in California. Jan 17, 2021. <https://www.sccgov.org/sites/covid19/Pages/press-release-01-17-2021-COVID-19-variant-more-frequent-in-CA.aspx> (accessed Feb 9, 2021).
  - 10 Zhang W, Davis BD, Chen SS, Martinez JMS, Plummer JT, Vail E. Emergence of a novel SARS-CoV-2 strain in Southern California, USA. *medRxiv* 2021; published online Jan 20. <https://doi.org/10.1101/2021.01.18.21249786> (preprint).
  - 11 PAHO, WHO. Occurrence of variants of SARS-CoV-2 in the Americas. Washington, DC: Pan American Health Organization, 2021.
  - 12 Franceschi VB, Caldana GD, de Menezes Mayer A, et al. Genomic epidemiology of SARS-CoV-2 in Esteio, Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil. *medRxiv* 2021; published online Jan 26. <https://doi.org/10.1101/2021.01.21.21249906> (preprint).
  - 13 Mwai P. Coronavirus: Africa infections have risen sharply in worst-affected countries. BBC, Jan 25 2021. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-53181555> (accessed Feb 9, 2021).
  - 14 Callaway E, Mallapaty S. Novavax offers first evidence that COVID vaccines protect people against variants. *Nature* 2021; **590**: 17.
    - 15 European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control. Risk related to spread of new SARS-CoV-2 variants of concern in the EU/EEA. Dec 29, 2020. <https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/publications-data/covid-19-risk-assessment-spread-new-sars-cov-2-variants-eueea> (accessed Feb 9, 2021).
  - 16 US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Emerging SARS-CoV-2 variants. Jan 15, 2021. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/more/science-and-research/scientific-brief-emerging-variants.html> (accessed Jan 20, 2021).
  - 17 Callaway E. Could new COVID variants undermine vaccines? Labs scramble to find out. *Nature* 2021; **589**: 177–78.
  - 18 Callaway E. Fast-spreading COVID variant can elude immune responses. *Nature* 2021; **589**: 50–51.
  - 19 Studdert DM, Hall MA, Mello MM. Partitioning the curve—interstate travel restrictions during the Covid-19 pandemic. *N Engl J Med* 2020; **383**: e83.
  - 20 McNeill K, Jacobs C. Half of the world's population lack access to essential health services—are we doing enough? World Economic Forum, Sept 20, 2019. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/09/half-of-the-world-s-population-lack-access-to-essential-health-services-ar-e-we-doing-enough/> (accessed Feb 9, 2021).
  - 21 WHO. COVAX Announces additional deals to access promising COVID-19 vaccine candidates: plans global rollout starting Q1 2021. Dec 18, 2020. <https://www.who.int/news/item/18-12-2020-covax-announces-additional-deals-to-access-promising-covid-19-vaccine-candidates-plans-global-rollout-starting-q1-2021> (accessed Feb 9, 2021).
  - 22 Ritchie H, Ortiz-Ospina E, Beltekian D, et al. Coronavirus (COVID-19) vaccinations. Our World in Data. 2021. <https://ourworldindata.org/covid-vaccinations> (accessed Feb 11, 2021).
  - 23 Council for Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights. Waiver from certain provisions of the TRIPS Agreement for the prevention, containment and treatment of Covid-19. Communication from India and South Africa. World Trade Organization, Oct 2, 2020. <https://docs.wto.org/dol2fe/Pages/SS/directdoc.aspx?filename=q:/IP/C/W669.pdf&Open=True>

- (accessed Feb 9, 2021).
- 24 Eurasia Group. Ending the Covid-19 pandemic: the need for a global approach. New York: Eurasia Group, 2020.
- 25 International Monetary Fund. World economic outlook, October 2020: a long and difficult ascent. October, 2020. <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/Issues/2020/09/30/world-economic-outlook-october-2020> (accessed Feb 9, 2021).
- 26 Battersby B, Lam WR, Ture E. Tracking the \$9 trillion global fiscal support to fight COVID-19. *IMF Blog*, May 20, 2020. <https://blogs.imf.org/2020/05/20/tracking-the-9-trillion-global-fiscal-support-to-fight-covid-19/> (accessed Feb 9, 2021).
- 27 Gurara D, Fabrizio S, Wiegand J. COVID-19: without help, low-income developing countries risk a lost decade. *IMF Blog*, Aug 27, 2020. <https://blogs.imf.org/2020/08/27/covid-19-without-help-low-income-developing-countries-risk-a-lost-decade/> (accessed Feb 9, 2021).
- 28 International Monetary Fund. Debt Service Relief from the Catastrophe Containment and Relief Trust (CCRT). 2020. <https://www.imf.org/en/Topics/imf-and-covid19/COVID-Lending-Tracker#ftn> (accessed Feb 10, 2021).