

Covid-19, Foreign Policy, and Human Rights event - 7 December 2021

Report by Paul Mrazek, UNA Westminster

Speakers

- María Fernanda Espinosa Garcés (Member of the Lancet Commission on Covid-19 and former President of UN General Assembly).
- David Nabarro CBE (Special Envoy on Covid-19 for the World Health Organisation).
- Mandeep Tiwana, Chief Programmes Officer at CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation.

Chair: Natalie Samarasinghe, Chief Executive Officer, UNA-UK

This event, over a year in the planning was conceived, under the working title ***“Covid-19 and future global pandemics – tragedy for the world, calamity for the poor. Why next time we must act together and through the UN”***. We assumed then that a full return to normality would be shortly on the cards.

The meeting we eventually held was worth the wait and offered unique insights into how decisions at the UN - and World Health Organization - are taken. A nice contrast to the usual sound bite guff we get via a national media news feed.

In her introduction, Natalie Samarasinghe’s highlighted the misery that the pandemic had inflicted on ordinary people with reports of gender based violence, and human rights abuses from all corners of the globe. COVID-19 has been a tragedy for our economies and for the global system more generally. Natalie praised those who had developed the vaccines but noted with concern that Covax had not received anywhere the number of donations it was promised. She believed that Covid vaccines should be declared a global public benefit and made available to everybody free at the point of use.

David Nabarro said that COVID-19 was the toughest of all challenges because it required learning on the job whilst at the same time seeking to manage an ongoing crisis. The world was not prepared. Covid could not be handled like another Flu or Ebola outbreak. The SARS outbreak of 2002-4 was its closest comparator. Incomplete information left Governments (and WHO) struggling in the early days of the pandemic.

So what have we learned? Well Covid 19 is here to stay i.e. it is now endemic. We can expect localised spikes from time to time and more variants. How virulent or not they will be, only time will tell.

The vaccines arrival was as a latter day miracle but you cannot use vaccinations alone to wish away the pandemic when it has yet to run its course. Supplementary measures are needed with a focus on those most at risk. David recommended con-

tinued mask wearing in enclosed spaces and social distancing linked to localised suppression strategies backed up by contact tracing.

I would have liked to have explored these points further as WHO advice on masks has been inconsistent in the past and the UK's experiment with test and test, to put it politely, has brought only mixed results. The bigger debate zero covid, focussed protection or something in-between will have to wait for another day and a time when our scientific community learn to debate freely with each other again instead of lodging comfortably in their own echo chambers.

David did say that it was not enough for UN member states to focus on their own people and revealed that one of the reasons for WHO declaring a global pandemic in the first place was due to a perceived failure by member states to respond to their earlier warnings about the scale of the threat.

I should stress on the question of face coverings that David referred specifically to "well-fitted" face masks presumably to make a distinction from those cheaper varieties that are in wide circulation.

He reiterated concerns expressed earlier in the week by Europe's WHO regional Director Dr Hans Kluge that vaccine mandates should be "a very last resort". We learned the next day that the UK Prime Minister wants to have 'a national conversation' about vaccine passports and other countries have already gone a lot further along that road which is deeply troubling from a human rights perspective.

María Fernanda Espinosa Garcés began her speech by highlighting the issue of vaccine hoarding by western nations which controlled over 90% of vaccine distribution. A situation exacerbated by the inadequacy of health systems globally and the geo-political tensions that often impacted on health decisions.

Maria stressed that there was already a wealth of research, analysis and ideas on how to tackle long term health crises but they had been left to gather dust over the years. Transformational change in global governance was needed underpinned by collective and consolidated multi-lateral action. A good starting point would be the UNSG's Our Common Agenda (<https://www.un.org/en/content/common-agenda-report/>) and the report of the Independent Panel for Pandemic Preparedness and Response, which urges, among other things, greater autonomy for WHO and the deployment of technical advisers to help countries address health emergencies.

On the question of vaccine roll out, she identified intellectual property rights as a particular obstacle to vaccine roll out in developing countries (i.e. sharing of technical knowledge to enable the local manufacture of vaccines) and suggested that these rules might need to be relaxed for the greater good.

Mandeep Tiwana, provided a useful civil society angle to all of this. The pandemic had further aggravated and embedded existing structural inequality. <https://civics.org/state-of-civil-society-report-2021/>. Modern economies are organised in such a way that a fortunate few can become incredibly wealthy overnight whilst millions of others go to bed hungry.

Covid pandemic management affords both risks and opportunities. *The key risk being that we continue doubling down with current policies with diminishing impact* The

main opportunity is that we use the experience of the crisis to rethink our entire approach.

A worrying development since the pandemic began has been the rise in xenophobia, blaming migrants for spreading the virus and some member states have sought to use the pandemic as a justification for crackdowns on political opponents. He feared that like the failure of the recent Glasgow climate change conference, we were reverting to business as usual.

He noted that many states were willing to countenance an international rule based approach on matters of commerce but shy away from applying international human rights frameworks. States currently involved in COVID-19 decision-making have been slow to protect personal freedoms, employing tools such as censorship, propaganda and rigidly enforced lockdowns.

It has been suggested that once these freedoms are sacrificed it will be very difficult to get them back again. The UK itself still operates under emergency Covid regulations two years on..

Mandep noted that market forces had been unable to solve the crisis. Monetised access to public services now dominates the way western economies operate.

He believed that 75 years on, the UN itself needed a revamp with a greater focus on people centred multilateralism. The true power of civil society was its ability to lay bare the fault lines of a country's decision makers.

He had his own a personal wish list based on returning to the values of the UN Charter, and a human rights based approach across the whole spectrum of global concerns.

Questions and discussion

Sadly there was not enough time to respond to all of the questions and comments at the meeting but UNA-UK committed to providing responses as part of its follow up work. Governments had been "super late" in the delivery of vaccines to Covax in the promised numbers and the renewed focus on vaccinating children and healthy adults was neither right or fair.

There was deep anger at the recent decision by western countries to ban flights from Nigeria and South Africa over Omicron especially when it was more than likely that the variant emerged from Europe.

In terms of the proposed new global health accord. David Nabarro stressed that a new WHO treaty with enforcement powers and a formal reporting process will take several years to put in place. *María Fernanda Espinosa Garcés earlier explained that the World Health Assembly's special session had given the go ahead to consider a new global accord by 2024 "if it is needed".* It was suggested that the cost of the new supporting infrastructure would be no more than that of a mid-size district hospital in New York. A review process on Covid under the existing global health treaty was already underway.

What can UNA's do?

The UNAs can speak candidly to authority particularly to their own Government's and explore issues that UN officials cannot do. When people get angry at the UN or a UN agency such as the WHO, UNAs are there to remind people that the **UN** is first and foremost the member states and that is where any pressure for reform needs to be focussed. It was vitally important for civil society groups to actively engage in that process.

David Nabarro rightly pointed to UN successes such as the various international Human Rights instruments that are available to it and the UN Sustainable Development goals which can have a real influence for the good.

In giving the vote of thanks Patricia Rogers, Chair of UNA London Region spoke of her concern at having received a Covid booster before many people in the developing countries. So she had made a donation to one of the UN global vaccine programmes, (*add links*) an example many of us might follow.

When the pandemic first hit I felt personally that Government responses had been disproportionate and I still have concerns but I was reassured having heard this first-hand account of the crisis directly from our friends in the UN and about the sterling work that the WHO is doing.

Mandeep Tiwana suggested that the UN would be well served by a return to the principles of the UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in its guiding framework. If it has drifted away from those founding ideals we are indeed in deep trouble.

The UNAs of the world are the critical friend of the UN and work to make their Government's better (i.e. more co-operative) members of the institution. This involves acting internationally wherever possible rather than on the basis of narrow domestic self-interest. In its essentials both the UN and the UNA's vision remain as relevant today as it was at the end of World War II.