Shifting power in pandemics

Review the videos from a public webinar on connecting and supporting preparedness 'from below'.

Background to the event

The COVID-19 pandemic catalysed new thinking about the place of local capacities in preparing for and responding to disease threats. Concepts such as 'community resilience' and 'community-centred' initiatives entered the discourse of global institutions, alongside a recognition that preparedness for future epidemics needs to address longer-term systemic concerns, such as those related to health and social protection systems and political-economic conditions.

Yet whilst there is much emphasis on improved surveillance and technical advances, such as vaccine platforms for immediate readiness, there is less attention to identifying and understanding preparedness 'from below' as a complementary effort to conventional preparedness investments. At the same time, discussions in decolonising global health point to a need for avoidance of inadvertent entrenchment of established power hierarchies and to ensure that better connections across scales of response can support inclusive and acceptable actions.

About the event

Through a Wellcome Trust-funded collaborative award, the Pandemic Preparedness Project has been researching preparedness 'from below' since 2019, asking 'who is being prepared for what, and by whom?' And, 'what can the world learn from people living with multiple health-related uncertainties in African settings?' In this online event, held on 16 November 2022, we shared reflections and sought comment and discussion on the kinds of efforts and global-local relations needed to strengthen, build and integrate local-level preparedness.

Man in homemade PPE in Sierra Leone. *Image: Melissa Parker*

PROGRAMME

Session 1: Learning from and with communities

Drawing on our recent research on pandemic preparedness, this session focused on local-level insights into how people navigate disease outbreaks in the context of often intersecting acute and chronic challenges and precarious livelihoods, amidst multiple uncertainties. These surface important insights about the place of local knowledge, diverse formal and informal public authorities, individual and collective agency and adaptability. They have implications for approaches to community engagement and understandings of the possibilities and limitations of community resilience.

The session featured a video from the field with project field researchers Bob Okello, Moses Baluku, Marion Baby-May Nyakoi, Foday Kamara, Peter Kermundu and Bono Ozunga.

Discussants:
- **Dr Guillermo Sequera**, Head of the National Health Surveillance Directorate, Ministry of Health, Paraguay.
- **Dr Amone Jackson**, Public Health Physician, Uganda.
- **Dr Alfred Jamiru**, National Pillar Lead, Social Mobilization, National COVID-19 Emergency Response Center (NaCOVERC), Sierra Leone.
- **Dr João Rangel de Almeida**, Technical Officer, WHO.

View Session 1

Session 2: Technologies and systems

The balance between technical, risk-based interventions in response to outbreaks and longer-term initiatives to strengthen health and social protection systems, ensure their agility and build relations of trust requires further attention. Furthermore, technologies such as vaccines, pharmaceutical treatments and diagnostic tools and the information about their use are not just neutral instruments but have important social dimensions, landing in particular historical and socio-political contexts. What might inclusive systems preparedness look like in different contexts?

The session featured presentations from project co-investigators Professor Grace Akello, Dr Lawrence Babawo, Dr Esther Yei Mokuwa and Dr Khoudia Sow.

Discussants:
- **Professor Ann H. Kelly**, Professor of Anthropology & Global Health, King's College, London.
- **Dr Thierno Baldé**, MD, PhD, Associate Professor, Université de Montréal and Regional COVID-19 Incident Manager, WHO Africa Region Office.
- **Dr Julienne Ngoundoung Anoko**, Focal Point Social Sciences and Risk Communication and Community Engagement Pillar Lead, WHO Regional Office for Africa/EPR/EMP.
- **Dr Cathy Roth**, Senior Research Fellow and Health Adviser from the Health Research Team, Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, UK.

View Session 2

Session 3: Connecting preparedness from below

How might global and regional efforts interconnect more effectively with preparedness 'from below'? What kinds of local capacities, global-local relations and mechanisms are needed for strengthening inclusive systems preparedness that is attentive to local realities? How might these concerns contribute to current global conversations?

Wrap up and discussion with panellists:
- **Dr Sylvie Briand**, Director, Global Infectious Hazard Preparedness Department, WHO.
- **Professor Susan Erikson**, Professor in Health Sciences, Simon Fraser University.
- **Professor David Heymann**, Professor of Infectious Disease Epidemiology, LSHTM, and Distinguished Fellow in the Global Health Programme at Chatham House.
- **Dr Chikwe Ihekweazu**, Assistant Director General, WHO, and Leader of the WHO Hub for Pandemic and Epidemic Intelligence.

View Session 3