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STATE OF WORLD HEALTH SECURITY & DIPLOMACY



**The G7 Response to
COVID-19: Next Steps**



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Executive Summary

The millions of lives lost to the COVID-19 pandemic, has shown the importance of collaboration between governments¹ of the G7 group of countries, in preventing and preparing adequately for pandemics. This paper is an independent assessment of experts from the Centre for Global Health Security and Diplomacy on the response of the G7² group of countries. It evaluates G7 health strategies and policy approach to pandemic response. It then uses the G7 Group response to the COVID-19 pandemic as a case study in outlining some of the major gaps in policy approach to pandemic response. Finally, the paper uses some of the gaps as a basis to provide recommendations on changes to G7 Pandemic response health policy.

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Background of G7

The Group of Seven (G7) constitutes a group of the world's seven most advanced and industrialized economies, all of which are wealthy democratic nations, coming together for open discussion between government officials, guest leaders and heads of international organizations such as the World Health Organization, the United Nations and the World Bank. The G7 includes the seven nations of Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom (UK), the United States (US) as well as the European Union (EU)¹. The gross domestic product (GDP) of all such nations combined accounts for nearly forty-four percent of the global economy. The G7 has shown a commitment to addressing global health obstacles and coordinating effort to improve health outcomes. The organization has been organized around health by discussing and working together on issues like pandemic preparedness, infectious disease control and healthcare access. The G7 nations have also pooled together resources and knowledge to support initiatives for health in developing countries and advance research in medical sciences.² ⁶

Aside from its background history, it is important to understand the system and functioning of the G7 in order to assess its actions. Note that the G7 does not have a permanent governmental administration and is not based on a treaty. The purpose of the G7 is to meet annually in order to discuss topics such as international security, policy, and economic strategies. The small-size membership is intended to promote cohesive decision making; however, the group has also been recognized for the failure to follow through with plans discussed and the exclusion of emerging nations which would be important contributors.¹ Additionally, its role is intended to complement that of the G20, composed of twenty member nations, who are regarded as the foundation for global economic collaboration. To date, the G7 has advanced discussion of topics such as gender equality, disarmament programs, and climate change. For example, the most recent discussion of the G7 was focused around response to the COVID-19 pandemic as well as Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Presidency of the G7, which is also recognized as G7 host, is rotated annually amongst member countries in an order of which the European Union is not a part of. It is the responsibility of the presidency to share a list of priorities for the year ahead and organize as well as host the annual Leaders' Summit. Following each summit, the leaders release a final statement summarizing the agreed-upon policy changes or initiatives. This is known as the outcomes document which can take the place of a declaration or a communiqué.²

¹Global Affairs Canada. (2023, July 19). Canada and the G7. GAC. https://www.international.gc.ca/world-monde/international_relations-relations_internationales/g7/index.aspx?lang=eng

²Council on Foreign Relations. (2023). What does the G7 do?. Council on Foreign Relations. <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/what-does-g7-do>

The most recent G7 summit of 2023 was hosted under Japan's presidency in Hiroshima, Japan (Global Affairs Canada, 2023). Nonmember nations are also invited sometimes to contribute to G7 meetings. Although G7 summits take place annually, it is crucial to understand that the G7 continues to be active throughout each year and meet as necessary to discuss global crises and move forward plans discussed at summits³.

⁹

To date, the G7 has held various health-related summits and discussions to address global health obstacles. Two of the main and notable summits of the G7 include the 2020 G7 Health Ministers' Meeting. At this summit, in response to the pandemic, the G7 health ministers hosted a virtual meeting in April 2020 to discuss how to respond to the crisis on an international level, share best practices and collaborate efforts to combat the pandemic effects. Another notable meeting was the G7 Global Health Summit in June 2021. During this event, the G7 member nations came together and discussed strengthening global health systems, pandemic preparedness, vaccine distribution and how to combat future health crises. Health summits such as these give the G7 member states an opportunity to work together, share expertise, and take unified action towards health issues that do not only affect their nation, but the international community.⁴ The focus on health security stems from the idea that threats to well-being are also equivalent to threats for the nations' economies, by putting at risk¹⁴ globalization and trade. The economies and financial status of such nations are critical to maintain particularly in terms of subsequent investment into healthcare infrastructure, technology, and general development which can lessen the risk for illness in the future. For example, in the case of a nation whose economy thrives with oil trade,¹⁵ more ill citizens results in less workers who are able to maintain this system and the income it produces for this country. As a result, this country would have less financial means to invest into healthcare development or prevention such as vaccine research, building of hospitals or clinics, funding of postsecondary institutions to develop future healthcare professionals⁵. It is important, therefore, to understand the G7's strategy in bettering healthcare, their priorities in doing so, and how these approaches are taken in order to better assess efficacy and future recommendations.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid.

G7's Strategy for Health

Given the G7 being a world-renown intergovernmental organization with leading democracies, health is a critical area of its focus. This is due to the serious impact which health has on overall well-being, stability of a nation, and economic development. The strategy of the G7 for health involves a variety of goals and priorities which guide actions. A primary priority of the G7 but also largely the international community is universal health coverage (UHC) for sustainable development. UHC offers a foundation for all individuals to have access to healthcare services without financial burden, ultimately addressing healthcare inequalities and improving health outcomes.⁶ As a second priority, the G7 also values strengthening the future of global health security through more prepared response mechanisms for health emergencies such as pandemics and epidemics. The idea of securing the future of global health includes the fortification of surveillance systems, mechanisms for early warning, research investment and biomedical technology innovation.⁶ Aside from these, the G7 also prioritizes gender equality and women's health in its strategy for approaching health-related action tasks. For example, this includes being able to recognize and research the burden of access to healthcare for women, gender-based disparities, and factors which may influence health decision making for women⁶. The G7 also seeks to support the issue of antimicrobial resistance (AMR) because it recognizes it as a concern of international level which requires the attention and contribution of many to address. To do so, the G7 seeks to influence education surrounding the proper and responsible use of antibiotics, improve technology surrounding surveillance and monitoring systems, and support research of new antimicrobial bodies which can improve health outcomes in the future⁶.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the G7 Health Ministers met in Paris, France in May 2019 under the French presidency. During this time, the key issues which the G7 sought to strategize in health were primary care, health inequalities, combating unequal access to healthcare and improving the effectiveness of health systems through spreading of knowledge.⁷ This is based on the idea that a strong foundation of primary health care is what ultimately decides the inclusivity and performance of healthcare systems. For example, primary care has been found to be a pivotal point in inclusive healthcare systems. As an example, a study looking at OECD and EU nations found that 68% of lower income populations had seen a general practitioner in 2019 in comparison to 72% in high-income groups demonstrating a minimal difference⁷.

⁶Ibid.

⁷OECD. (2023). 4. Post-COVID-19 spatial effects and policy responses for G7 countries. Implications of Remote Working Adoption on Place Based Policies: A Focus on G7 Countries | OECD iLibrary. https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/b12f6b85-en/1/3/4/index.html?itemId=%2Fcontent%2Fpublication%2Fb12f6b85-en&_csp_=aa3e849e49119ed776a9a0104502408d&itemIG=oeed&itemContentType=book

Additionally, primary care is imperative to improving health literacy and reducing avoidable hospital visits and burden on emergency healthcare systems.⁸ Knowing this, primary healthcare remains a focus of the G7 strategies in health because it is still assessed as not being developed enough. Using data from the same study previously mentioned, avoidable admissions that should have been addressed in primary healthcare equated to 6.1% of hospital beds in 2016, accounting for an average of \$835 million in OECD nations. Furthermore, only 14% of total spending for health is allocated to primary care across OECD countries, while the number of general practitioners has also decreased by 3% from 2000 to 2016.⁸ The G7 recognizes the importance of shifting reactive healthcare to a preventative approach; the ability to initiate and maintain electronic health records (EHR) are an important part of making this happen. While OECD nations measure primary care experiences, there also exists a lack of knowledge surrounding patient reported outcomes which is also a key focus of improvement. Therefore, moving forward, the G7 acknowledges that primary care development requires greater investment in both resources and organization⁸.

To increase accountability towards these values and goals, the flagship “UHC Action Agenda” was initiated in March 2023 as a multi-stakeholder partnership using the administration of the WHO, Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the World Bank. This flagship was also intended to increase nations’ desire to attend United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) high-level meetings on UHC. As a result, the G7 established the “G7 Global Plan for UHC Action Agenda” covering eight action areas on which they seek to take measurable steps towards achieving this goal.⁹ The action plans include championing political leadership for UHC, addressing needs of vulnerable and marginalized populations, adopting enabling laws and regulations, strengthening healthcare workforce to provide high-quality service, investing more and with greater strategy, maintaining cohesiveness of governments with UHC, supporting a focus on gender equality in health, and connecting UHC and health security. To achieve its goals for healthcare, the G7 has initiated various initiatives and programs. One of such initiatives includes that of the G7 Global Health Security Initiative (GHSI) whose focus is on the strengthening of healthcare systems’ ability to prevent, recognize and address global health threats. Therefore, the GHSI assists nations in building and maintaining sustainable healthcare systems, to establish effective monitoring technology and promote reliable education standards during global health threats.¹⁰

⁸Ibid.

⁹G7 Research Group - University of Toronto. (2023). Action area 1: Champion political leadership for universal health coverage. G7 Research Group. [http://www.g7.utoronto.ca/healthmins/230514-uhc-global-plan.html#:~:text=\(Overall%0Description\),G7%20to%20contribute%20to%20UHC](http://www.g7.utoronto.ca/healthmins/230514-uhc-global-plan.html#:~:text=(Overall%0Description),G7%20to%20contribute%20to%20UHC)

¹⁰Global Health Security Initiative. (2023, March 10). Global Health Security Initiative. <http://ghsi.ca/>

The G7 has also worked with external organizations, such as the WHO, to achieve these goals. This has maintained efficiency of health systems through research involving health inequities or even supply distribution such as vaccines in case of emergencies. The importance of research in the G7's strategy for health is exemplified by the launch of the Global Health Research and Development (R&D) Collaboration Hub. The hub serves as a community and collaborative space where researchers can share scientific knowledge, discuss, and work together in better understanding medical diagnoses, vaccines, and prognoses for present or upcoming global health threats.¹¹ Given the agenda and efforts of the G7, it is also important to recognize its overall impact on improving healthcare internationally. The G7 has played an important role in shaping the health agenda for not only member nations, but other nations as well, by recognizing global health priorities and distributing resources. In fact, the G7 nations also have strategized their approach to health by supporting technical assistance, educational training programs and sharing of knowledge to low-income nations. This is critical to the sustainability of healthcare by creating a more educated professional and general population in low-income nations who can make for a more sustainable future, despite resource availability.¹¹

The UHC Action Agenda has promoted dialogue and discussion amongst stakeholders and the general public surrounding strengths and weaknesses of their respective healthcare systems, inequities, and social determinants of health.¹² This discussion has particularly mobilized ideas surrounding UHC and how this can be integrated in different cultural and political spheres through policymaking. Hence, it also raises awareness for global health issues as leader nations who hold great power and influence on an international stage. The G7 has the ability to share statements, declarations and take action which can draw attention towards the current healthcare crises or necessary resources from external supporters such as philanthropic foundations. It has also given nations a framework to refer to in terms of emergency response and the important characteristics of a resilient global health network.¹² Among its member states, the G7's strategy for health has allowed bonding through knowledge sharing, discussion, and mutual development. This has served as critical in strengthening relationships between the member states and leveraging trust in one another's ideas, research, and strategies. As a result, this positive relationship influences the ability of member states to further cooperate and collaborate beyond healthcare in realms like education, the work sphere, or trade.¹²

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Ibid.

An important point of this collaboration is the consistency in addressing healthcare challenges which prevents the unnecessary loss of resources, and instead helps maximize efficiency and improve coherence towards policy. In addition to this, the G7's strategy has significantly affected global health collaboration in terms of funding.¹³ The member nations, which again include some of the leading economies in the world, have an opportunity to invest financial resources into health initiatives and support their own but also other fellow member states and non-member nations' healthcare challenges. For example, the G7 countries vowed to invest financially to initiatives in fighting AIDS, Tuberculosis, Malaria, and the vaccine alliance of Gavi. All of such investments help to fund and support programs who focus on their individual treatment developments and services towards their particular vulnerable target populations. A byproduct of such investments are the mobilization of investment³⁰ from non-member states and other stakeholders.¹⁴ By financially contributing to the future of global health security, the G7 nations encourage and support others to do so, further increasing the financial resources available for tackling health care problems. Overall, the G7 hosts a comprehensive approach to healthcare which is crucial in the global health agenda, and a ripple effect in partnerships and support, and continued momentum towards a healthier future for all.¹⁴

COVID-19 Pandemic

Impact of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic had a profound impact on public health worldwide. With over 767 million confirmed cases and even million deaths reported by the World Health Organization (WHO) as of 2021, healthcare systems faced unprecedented strain. Particularly affecting low to middle income nations with limited public health resources, the pandemic put immense pressure on healthcare professionals and resources. Efforts in testing, contact tracing, and vaccination campaigns became critical in controlling the spread of the virus, especially in vulnerable populations with pre-existing health conditions or compromised immune systems.¹⁵ The pandemic's economic repercussions were severe and widespread. Measures such as lockdowns, travel restrictions, and social distancing caused disruptions in supply chains, led to business bankruptcies, and resulted in a significant loss of jobs in various sectors like tourism, retail, and transportation. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) projected a global economic contraction in 2020, impacting GDP growth rates negatively. To mitigate the economic impact, governments and international organizations, such as the Canadian Federal Government, increased financial support to their citizens.¹⁵

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵World Health Organization. (2021). G7 announces pledges of 870 million COVID-19 vaccine doses, of which at least half to be delivered by the end of 2021. World Health Organization.

Education systems worldwide were deeply affected by the pandemic. School closures and lockdowns hindered students' access to traditional classroom learning, resulting in increased learning loss and emphasized educational inequalities.¹⁶ Moreover, students' mental health suffered due to reduced social interaction, limited physical activity, and increased stress. The pandemic highlighted the need for online learning platforms and strategies for a careful reintroduction of students to in-person schooling once restrictions were lifted. Additionally, mental health concerns were a critical issue for individuals of all ages during the pandemic, with stress, social isolation, financial challenges, and fear of infection contributing to higher rates of anxiety, depression, and other mental illnesses.¹⁶ This underscored the importance of accessible and affordable mental health care, as well as virtual communication platforms, to address social connectedness and confront the long-term mental health impact of COVID-19 on individuals and families.¹⁶

G7's COVID-19 Response

Collaborative Programs

The G7 response for health interventions included aspects like testing and diagnostic capacity, vaccine development and distribution, global vaccine access, healthcare system strengthening, public health guidelines, research, and global health collaboration. In terms of implementing health interventions or making changes to existing ones, one of the key⁴ responses of the G7 was in terms of vaccinations. For example, at the G7 Summit in Germany in 2022, the organizations vowed to continue to accelerate efforts of equitable and fast vaccine distribution which is validated as safe, effective and affordable. In addition to this, they responded by increasing access to diagnostics, and other health equipment needed by countries through various mechanisms.¹⁷ One of such mechanisms included contributing financially to support the Access to COVID-19 Tools Accelerator (ACT-A), a partnership initiated by WHO and other partners to accelerate the development and production of COVID-10 diagnostic tools, treatments and vaccines.¹⁷

¹⁶Finding hope during a difficult time. Global Fund for Children. (2022, June 23). https://globalfundforchildren.org/news/finding-hope-during-a-difficult-time/?gclid=Cj0CQjwn_OlBhDhARIsAG2y6zPj7J-oX5Q9TDPzD0h6hcFQm6kJLiPhmr0hn0GZmgPjOUruQ-2m8aAtl7EALw_wcB

¹⁷European Union. (2022). Action plan on covid-19. <https://www.bundesregierung.de/resource/blob/998440/2039774/d432a00a843e8176ad28c2b1448ca20/2022-05-13-g7-foreign-minister-action-plan-covid-en-data.pdf?download=1>

Vaccinations

The G7 also worked closely with governments through the COVID-19 Vaccine Delivery Partnership for almost 115 countries around the world, especially low-income nations with financial support of nearly \$4 billion USD. This funding helped ensure that such nations were equipped with syringes and other necessary equipment, were able to fund training for staff on facilitating vaccinations, supporting educational campaigns aimed to de-mystify vaccine efficacy and work with private institutions who could provide cold-chain management for the vaccines.¹⁸ Moreover, the organization improved ground coordination with donors to create synergy within the system, integrate measures within health systems to reinforce other national immunization campaigns, and support countries towards achieving the 70% coverage rate. COVAX is the pillar involving vaccines of the ACT-A platform which the G7 also focuses on supporting, especially in low and middle income nations. The COVAX initiative is led collaboratively by the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI), Gavi, and WHO, with UNICEF or the PAHO Revolving Fund acting as delivery partners.¹⁸ A key goal of COVAX is to ensure equitable access for different nations around the world. The G7 provided and vowed to support \$18.33 billion USD for ACT-A program, 12.36 billion of which was allocated to COVAX. Moreover, the G7 committed to sharing safe vaccines where needed without regard to political issues or alliances; as of May 2022, the organization had donated 1.18 billion doses and remain open to sharing doses depending on needs of different nations. Additionally, the G7 worked in partnership with COVAX but also vaccine manufacturers and recipient nations to better coordinate and facilitate the process of distribution in terms of both timelines and logistics.¹⁸

Mental Illness and Lifestyle Support

One of the major impacts of COVID-19 pandemic was increasing mental illness rates. G7 nations like the US enhanced citizens' access to mental health support. For example, the United States launched The Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act setting aside nearly \$2 trillion. CARES had several missions, of which aside from health assistance and reimbursement, included unemployment assistance, business relief, tax breaks and credits, and local government support.¹⁹ CARES also helped finance the prevention and also treatment of COVID-19. It did so by increasing payments to healthcare suppliers and professionals, while covering Medicare reimbursements, grants, and federal finances. This also relaxed the requirements for drug approvals in order to make responses for COVID-19 more flexible and efficient.¹⁹ It mandated health insurance providers to cover COVID-19 tests, in addition to treatments and vaccines which were being developed, protected healthcare professionals legally, and increased funding for provider training programs. Meanwhile, France also launched a country-wide platform named "Psycom" intended towards psychological support.¹⁹

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Moss et al. (2020, June 15). The coronavirus aid, relief, and Economic Security Act: Summary of key health provisions. KFF.

<https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/issue-brief/the-coronavirus-aid-relief-and-economic-security-act-summary-of-key-health-provisions/>

Social Interventions for Human Capital

During the G7 Summit in Japan 2023, the group responded to inflation, wage erosion and demographic changes. For healthy working systems, work-life balance and career development, the G7 reflected this in the “G7 Action Plan for Promoting Career Development and Greater Resilience to Structural Changes”.²⁰ To do so, the action plan included the commitment to support workers and employers in promoting decent work, promoting adequate wages, making sure of occupational health, promoting well-being in the workplace, improving the quality of human resource management, developing high quality care-related employment opportunities, and building highly sustainable global supply chains.²⁰ Furthermore, G7 nations prioritized campaigns which supported digital inclusivity and education continuation while the pandemic was occurring. For example, the organization invested financially into online learning platforms, made internet connectivity and electronic devices accessible to students at a disadvantage, and also put forward training opportunities for educators to learn how to better facilitate learning in online classrooms. For example, as a member state, the United Kingdom initiated a program titled “Laptops and Tablets for Schools” during the pandemic, while Japan initiated “Connected Schools” in order to improve students’ access to electronic devices in order to continue their education.²⁰

One of the most impacted social groups during the pandemic were vulnerable populations, who were disproportionately affected and considered when it came to the G7’s response. For example, one of the most vulnerable social groups during this time were those who were experiencing homelessness. During the pandemic, the G7 nations improved social security funding and strengthened health support for such communities. Specifically, the United Kingdom increased the range of eligibility requirements for those to meet welfare program access, while Canada also increased funding to food banks across the nation.²¹ Women’s empowerment was another large component of social programs which were assessed and reformed; therefore, this was also an important focus group for the G7 nations to address gender-based violence, women’s health and women’s economic participation. To do so, Germany, for example, launched a program called “Emergency Program for Combating Violence Against Women” in order to support domestic violence victims during the pandemic. Aside from this, fellow nations beyond the G7 group were also critical in social security investments. This explains the G7’s response of investing in the UN’s COVID-19 Global Humanitarian Response Plan, and WHO’s COVID-19 Fast-Track Facility.²¹

²⁰ILO welcomes G7 commitment to invest in human capital and decent work. G7 Labour and Employment Ministers Meeting: ILO welcomes G7 commitment to invest in human capital and decent work. (2023, April 24). https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS_878373/lang-en/index.htm

²¹Fiscal Monitor Database of Country Fiscal Measures in Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic. IMF. (2021, June 18). <https://www.imf.org/en/Topics/imf-and-covid19/Fiscal-Policies-Database-in-Response-to-COVID-19>

Economic Restructuring and Debt Resolution

The G7 nations used various different approaches in addressing the significant economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. During the 2022 G7 Elmau Summit, leaders committed to economic resilience and security, and enhancing supply chain sustainability as per the G7 Clean Energy Economy Action Plan. The organization believes that in order to achieve this, cooperation amongst the G7 and its partners are critical to benefit low and middle-income nations to increase diversity and benefit local workers.²² The goal was to do so by confronting non-market policies to strengthen dependencies and oppose economic coercion. An important part of the G7's economic approach was also to ensure technological sensitivity to assure national security in order to maintain worldwide technology trade. Part of enhancing global economic resilience included building resilient supply chains. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic had a large effect in supply chains for developing, newly-advancing, and already advanced nations.²² The G7 implemented the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment which advocated for fair trade relationships, with respect for international law and opposed weaponizing energy. It was the G7's focus to particularly make supply chains for minerals, semiconductors and batteries most sustainable, and enhance communication methods to improve sharing knowledge of best practices and problem-solving of disruptions.²²

Aside from building resilient supply chains, the G7 emphasized the importance of addressing behaviors that go against international policies or seek to exploit economic vulnerabilities. Given the devastating economic impact of COVID-19, it is essential to ensure that nations have a chance to build strong financial foundations without unfair political power control. For example, China, who had a gross domestic product (GDP) of \$17.7 trillion implemented coercive trade measures on Lithuania, who had a GDP of \$66.4 billion.²³ Knowing this, the G7 launched the Coordination Platform on Economic Coercion to promote cooperation within the economic sphere. This agreement is also referred to as the Countering Economic Coercion Task Force. As a part of its mandate, this platform is required to discuss with partners how to best respond to situations of economic coercion, such as China. It allows us to share information about similar international events and consult member states to analyze the circumstances, explore different responses and decide when needed how to counter this economic coercion.²³

²²The United States Government. (2023, May 20). G7 leaders' statement on economic resilience and economic security. The White House. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/05/20/g7-leaders-statement-on-economic-resilience-and-economic-security/>

²³Frederick, B., & Shatz, H. J. (2023, June 9). The Global Movement against China's economic coercion is accelerating. RAND Corporation. <https://www.rand.org/blog/2023/06/the-global-movement-against-chinas-economic-coercion.html>

The G7 has also prioritized economic recovery through business support programs for those affected by the pandemic to assist with wages, loans, and financial aid. For example, Germany began the ‘Kurzarbet’ program which financially supported wages for employees for businesses during work reduction. At the same time, Canada implemented the Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy for businesses in maintaining and also hiring back their employees.²⁴ The G7 nations also cooperated on implementing debt relief programs, for example including the Debt Service Suspension Initiative and the Common Framework for Debt Treatment. Both of such programs support individuals through temporary relief of their debt and an idea of how to repay their debt through a restructuring framework. On a global level, G7 members helped in debt suspension for nations who were eligible and allowed them to instead focus their resources on the health and well-being of their citizens.²⁴ Moreover, the G7 organization worked in partnership with institutions like the IMF and World Bank to provide further financial aid to countries in need while also donating to the IMF’s emergency program and the World bank’s COVID-19 Fast-Track Facility program. In fact, the G7 member states promised financial contributions to the Catastrophe Containment and Relief Trust also supporting debt relief for countries who are eligible, which is also a program run by the IMF.²⁴ Aside from financial donations, the organization also responded to the pandemic through investing in healthcare, sustainable energy and infrastructure. Member states such as Canada and Germany announced investments in renewable infrastructure and non-polluting energy in order to further recover their economies in the long-term.²⁴

Policy and Institution Reforms for Rebuilding Better

Policy reforms are a critical component of creating legal changes and advancements following a highly-impactful event such as COVID-19. In response to the pandemic, the G7 implemented various policy reforms in order to build resilience for future public health emergencies. Aside from reforms focused directly on health interventions, such as the United Kingdom’s Health Infrastructure Plan launch to invest in developing more hospitals, upgrading existing healthcare centres and expanding critical care accommodation, the G7 has also focused on other aspects of policy reform as a result of the pandemic. One of such reforms includes the above mentioned commitments to clean energy. For example, the organization is committed to zero net emissions by 2050 by reaffirming their dedication to the Paris Agreement. The goal of this agreement involved providing a reference point for a shift towards a net zero emissions future, and further achievement towards the SDG’s.²⁵

²⁴United Nations. (2021). Sustainable Development Outlook 2021. <https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/wp-content/uploads/sites/45/publication/PB81.pdf>

²⁵United Nations. (n.d.). The Paris Agreement. United Nations. <https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/paris-agreement#:~:text=How%20does%20it%20work%3F,Nationally%20Determined%20Contribution%2C%20or%20NDC>

It was based upon the idea that every five years, each nation is expected to share an updated version of a national climate action plan, termed the nationally determined contribution (NDC). This NDC would be responsible for marking actionable goals about the nation's reducing of greenhouse gas emissions to achieve the objectives of the Paris Agreement.²⁶ By doing so, the G7 helped to create an energetically sustainable future, to minimize living costs in the case of emergencies such as the pandemic in the future and instead maximize institutions' available financing for other things such as necessary equipment or scientific research.²⁶

Aside from this, the pandemic also introduced a different lifestyle in terms of remote working. Therefore, policy reform responses greatly involved ensuring that remote working was beneficial for both employers and employees. For example, the G7 nations recognized that remote work can decrease costs of employers by preventing financial allocation towards office spaces, and also reducing environmental emissions associated with commuting to work.²⁷ In addition to this, it was found that remote work can result in better time management for employees, decreased stress levels and better work-life lifestyle balance. On the other hand, it is recognized that remote working can result in higher costs for nations who experience more extreme climates, isolation which may put at risk mental health and blended overtime work. In response to this new way of working during and after the pandemic, the G7 nations responded through relevant policy changes.²⁷ In Canada, this included information campaigns including a "Going Remote Guide", "Remote Work Toolkit for Employers from the City of Vancouver". Meanwhile, in France, this policy reform came in the form of trained digital mediators, increased national funding for digital projects and support for unions and employers to cover employee expenses under remote work conditions. Likewise, in Italy, this resulted in a response of a 15% tax credit for investment in software and technology, information technology equipment being made available to Public Administration employees through the Cura Italia decree and a ministerial decree to promote teleworking for at least 50% of public administration jobs.²⁷ Germany changed their policy to accommodate remote work by entitling employees up to 600 Euros for home office costs deductible from citizens' 2020 and 2021 income tax reports. Moreover, the nation also allowed citizens to claim their office expenses as income related expenses up to 1250 Euros for the income tax year.²⁷ In the case of Japanese policy reform, the nation implemented the "Regional Vitalization Teleworking Grant", campaigns surrounding delocalization and management, information technology support to promote teleworking, and investment in broadband infrastructure. Similarly, the United Kingdom also reformed policy in terms of investing greater in broadband, and providing tax relief for household cost balance from remote working.²⁷

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Ibid.

Policy Analysis

Limitations of G7's Role in Health

After assessing the role of the G7 in pandemic response, it is clear that the organization plays an important role in global coordination and emergency response efforts. However, outside of its prestigious reputation, the G7 also faces some challenges in terms of its pandemic response and the implications for global health. Firstly, one of the major limitations of the G7 response is that it in itself is a limited organization. The G7 solely represents seven of the world's nations and economies, all of which are advanced infrastructure. Therefore, the decisions made and actions implemented to address emergencies such as the pandemic, are made from the viewpoints of leaders who culturally come from such advanced economies. Hence, the insight towards what may be most culturally and socially effective for lower-income nations is low. This is limiting in that its actions may not result in the outreach which is expected, or its intended outcomes.²⁸ Instead, it may result in a waste of resources and prolonged response times associated with strategizing for a new approach, and coordinating the logistics for a new response. Furthermore, the vaccine distribution response of the G7 has been limited in that it has been unequal, and the organization has had difficulty in publicly addressing this issue. For example, although member nations advanced in vaccinating their own citizens, low-income nations had difficulty in securing vaccination supplies, which has further divided the economic status between nations and also negatively affected the containment of the virus.²⁸ On this note, within the G7 itself, there has been a history of difficulty in coordination and cooperation; as a result of different interests of member states and cultural values, the pandemic response has included disagreements surrounding patent waivers for vaccine, intellectual property rights, and distribution strategies which have stood in the way of a completely collaborative response.²⁸

One of the major limitations of the G7 pandemic response is that the decisions amongst the member states lack authority of binding. This means that decisions made in the G7 rely on voluntary efforts of the member states and do not formally enforce the members to ensure that commitments are followed through. For example, this would mean that pledged financial support and resources are not ensured to be actually allocated to decrease the effects of the pandemic. In fact, Dr. Stephan Singer, the senior advisor of the Climate Action Network International organization states along with other officials in response to the G7's lack of compliance to their pledges that "too little too late is an understatement. The G7, representing about half of global wealth, has failed once again as a collective to comply with its historic and current responsibilities".²⁹

²⁸Vayez, A. (2021, July 13). G7 summit 2021 – A case of failed multilateralism. LSE Department of International Relations. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/internationalrelations/2021/06/23/g7-summit-2021-failed-multilateralism/>

²⁹Climate Action Network. (2023, May 22). Civil society groups slam G7 for poor climate leadership and backsliding on promises. Climate Action Network. <https://climatenetwork.org/2023/05/20/civil-society-groups-slam-g7-on-lack-of-climate-leadership-and-backsliding-on-promises/>

As a whole, this is not only detrimental to the pandemic response, but also in the reputation of the organization in making sure that member states are held accountable for commitments, and resources which lower-income nations depend on.³⁰ Another issue within the G7 response is the prolonged response times - the organization decision-making process since it involves representatives from seven different nations can be delayed and time-consuming, which results in longer times needed to implement responses. This is due to the bureaucratic nature of the organization which can slow down response times, in contrast to rapid decisions needed in cases of public emergency.³⁰ In addition to this, the G7 response is also limited by geopolitical tension between its member states. For example, there exist differences in foreign policies and historical conflict which might influence representatives' willingness to share information such as statistics concerning the pandemic, which influences trust in the organization. Undoubtedly, a lack of trust within the member states influences the validity of the information being used to develop a response, and reliability in colleague nations acting upon their collaborative promises.³⁰

Evaluating G7's COVID-19 Response

Aside from such limitations, other obstacles in the way of the G7 pandemic response is the ability to allocate resources depending upon member states' economic status. For example, with the current issue of global warming, experts have predicted that G7 nations will lose 8.5% of their GDP per year, should temperatures rise by 2.6 degrees celsius.³¹ Knowing this, it is evident that member nations also hold their own priorities in allocation of funds, which would be prioritized towards their own states first before considering lower income nations. Therefore, it may be challenging, especially moving forward, that the G7 is able to consistently support outside nations especially during time periods of economic strain. This is emphasized by the approach of the G7 in relying upon market mechanisms.³⁰ This refers to a market system where the balance of supply and demand is what determines both the value and the amount of traded goods.³² This system is limiting because in the case of low supply and high demand, the prices for resources which would have been promised by the G7, such as vaccine supplies or other medical equipment would be highly priced. In turn, this would impact the amount of goods purchased by the G7 organization, which would result in offering countries in need a much lower amount of goods than those pledged. Therefore, this approach ultimately enhances existing inequalities between the member states and other nations, and limits access to necessary resources for low-income countries.³²

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Swiss Re Institute. (2021a). The economics of climate change: no action not an option. <https://www.swissre.com/dam/jcr:e73ee7c3-7f83-4c17-a2b8-8ef23a8d3312/swiss-re-institute-expertise-publication-economics-of-climate-change.pdf>;

³²Nasrudin, A. (2022, April 12). Market mechanism: Meaning, how it works. Penpoin. <https://penpoin.com/market-mechanism/>

Also, it has been noted that the G7 pandemic response has lacked the necessary attention in regards to global preparedness when it comes to global health security and public health emergencies. This is evident in cases other than the pandemic, such as in the case of the current climate threat and fossil fuel proliferation.³³ Overall, it is clear that while the G7 has important values in making decisions and implementing responses, the organization faces multiple serious obstacles in effectively confronting health crises problems. Moving forward, the G7 must reflect upon these limitations in order to catalyze better international collaboration, ensure equitable resource distribution, address geopolitical tensions, and prioritize global preparedness to better present for future crises.

Policy Recommendations

Legal and Financial Preparedness

It is essential that the organization prioritizes preparedness, and invests accordingly to this value. The prioritization of preparedness is critical in assessing when it comes to national budgets of the member states. It is advised that all leaders of the G7 nations designate an office responsible for global health security, which would assist outside agencies to respond quickly to outbreaks. To work in collaboration with the G7, an ambassador-level official should be appointed to report to secretary offices to elevate global health security in national policy, and coordinate with international organizations. Also, it is suggested that the G7 nations as economic leaders significantly increase the budget devoted to pandemic preparedness.³⁴ For example, the U.S. government currently spends \$750 billion per year on military costs to ensure military preparedness. In contrast, the budget for global health security and adequate preparedness is lacking and must be improved in the same way. This budget should include financial support for preparedness projects, national health institutes, vulnerable countries' support, as well as national hospitals and research.³⁴ Furthermore, it is recommended that each G7 member state conducts a thorough review of their disease control and prevention center performance to assess for managerial and financial policy reforms. By doing so, each nation can identify obstacles to their effectiveness and how to improve in the future. For example, reforms can include seeking to develop more sensitive public health surveillance systems, improving their workforce overseas, development of pandemic response models, and improving the testing and tracing capacity across the nations.³⁴

³⁴Burwell et al. (2020). Recommendations | pandemic preparedness: Lessons from covid-19. Council on Foreign Relations. <https://www.cfr.org/report/pandemic-preparedness-lessons-COVID-19/recommendations/>

Equitable Vaccine Access

Outside of internal reforms and reflection, the G7 response should prioritize efforts in ensuring equitable vaccine access globally. To do so, the organization must support the COVAX program and both financially and logistically support low-income nations. In the case of resource or medical equipment shortages, the G7 should initiate collaborations with vaccine distributors and manufacturers in order to expedite the production process. On a similar note, the G7 is recommended to advocate for temporary waivers of patents on COVID-19 vaccines and technologies like treatments.³⁵ By putting a suspension on intellectual property rights, this would allow more countries, particularly those who are low to middle-income to produce the vaccine technologies locally which may be more financially feasible. Aside from financial feasibility, this may also address vaccine hesitancy for nations' citizens, who may be suspicious of medical technologies being delivered and administered which were produced from outside of their country.³⁵ In addition to this, it is suggested that the G8 focuses on strengthening global health systems in developing countries to also ensure their preparedness. This includes contributing to improve the infrastructure of their healthcare, medical training, and access to necessary diagnostics. Going hand in hand with this, the G7 should also promote international collaboration in scientific research to understand how vaccines are developed and received in different cultural and political contexts. By doing so, there will be a more open system of sharing knowledge and data, which enables more effective responses to how to control and confront future public health outbreaks. Likewise, it is critical for the G7 to economically support vulnerable countries.³⁵ This includes preventing political conflict from resulting in sanctions or other economic limitations, and instead providing economic support to vulnerable nations who face both public health impacts and economic crises. In other words, it is critical for the G7 to recognize and facilitate globalization in its policy reforms to ensure that these nations have an opportunity to learn from more wealthy nations, and have a hopeful future for public health responses with less reliance on international support. This includes providing debt relief, grants or financing opportunities so that low-income nations can recover financial burdens and improve public health response sustainability.³⁵

³⁵Tbid.

Collaboration and Information Sharing

It is also important that moving forward, G7 member states also work together in strengthening the WHO. This includes reflecting upon and reforming the international governance system for health in order to improve coordination in the future. A large part of this coordination includes the sharing of knowledge, as previously mentioned. Therefore, the G7 is recommended to work in collaboration with information technology professionals to establish a platform for real-time data sharing and surveillance in order to improve the tracking and spread of the COVID-19 and other future viruses with accuracy.³⁶ The accumulation of information can improve officials' understanding of areas which require the most attention, and prioritization in terms of equipment needed in timely manners. A critical component to the future of the G7 is their ability to combat misinformation surrounding public health crises like COVID-19 through unified and consistent public awareness campaigns. This will help build trust not only with each member states' population, but also build trust in the G7 organization as a whole and in citizens' belief in other member states as well.³⁶ In order to ensure a sustainable future, it is also critical that as a part of the recovery after the pandemic, the G7 promotes investment in green infrastructure. This emphasizes the importance of climate action and will contribute to resilience against future health challenges as well as environmental obstacles. Most importantly, a great learning lesson for the future is reflection.³⁶ Therefore, the G7 should identify successful responses for COVID-19, strengthen these and better them moving forward. This should not be limited to member states, but rather best practices from other nations as well to further benefit global response.³⁶ It is evident that the G7 is an influential body in the field of global health security; hence, adopting such policy recommendations can improve its development into a more equitable, coordinated and reliable organization. It is with optimism that the G7 will lead with positive examples, facilitate collaboration and international projects to mitigate the COVID-19 impacts and prevent similar public health crises in the future.

³⁶Ibid.

Conclusion

The G7 group's response to COVID-19 can be recognized through collaboration, and a dedication to mitigating the pandemic's effects on an international level. Despite the challenges presented, G7 member states have worked together to address the public health crisis and other healthcare impacts of the virus. In particular, the group coordinated efforts to share information, expertise and resources to combat the spread of the virus. Vaccination campaigns are a significant focus of the group with billions of vaccine dose administration and achieve herd immunity. The response has enhanced attention towards the importance of equitable vaccine distribution to ensure that all human beings have access to life-saving medical technology. Overall, the G7's response reflects a commitment to compassion, solidarity, and learning, demonstrating the complexity and significance of global health. Although great progress has been made, continued efforts and collaboration among and beyond G7 member states remains critical to navigate the path to recovery from the pandemic in order to build a more resilient future of healthcare.

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