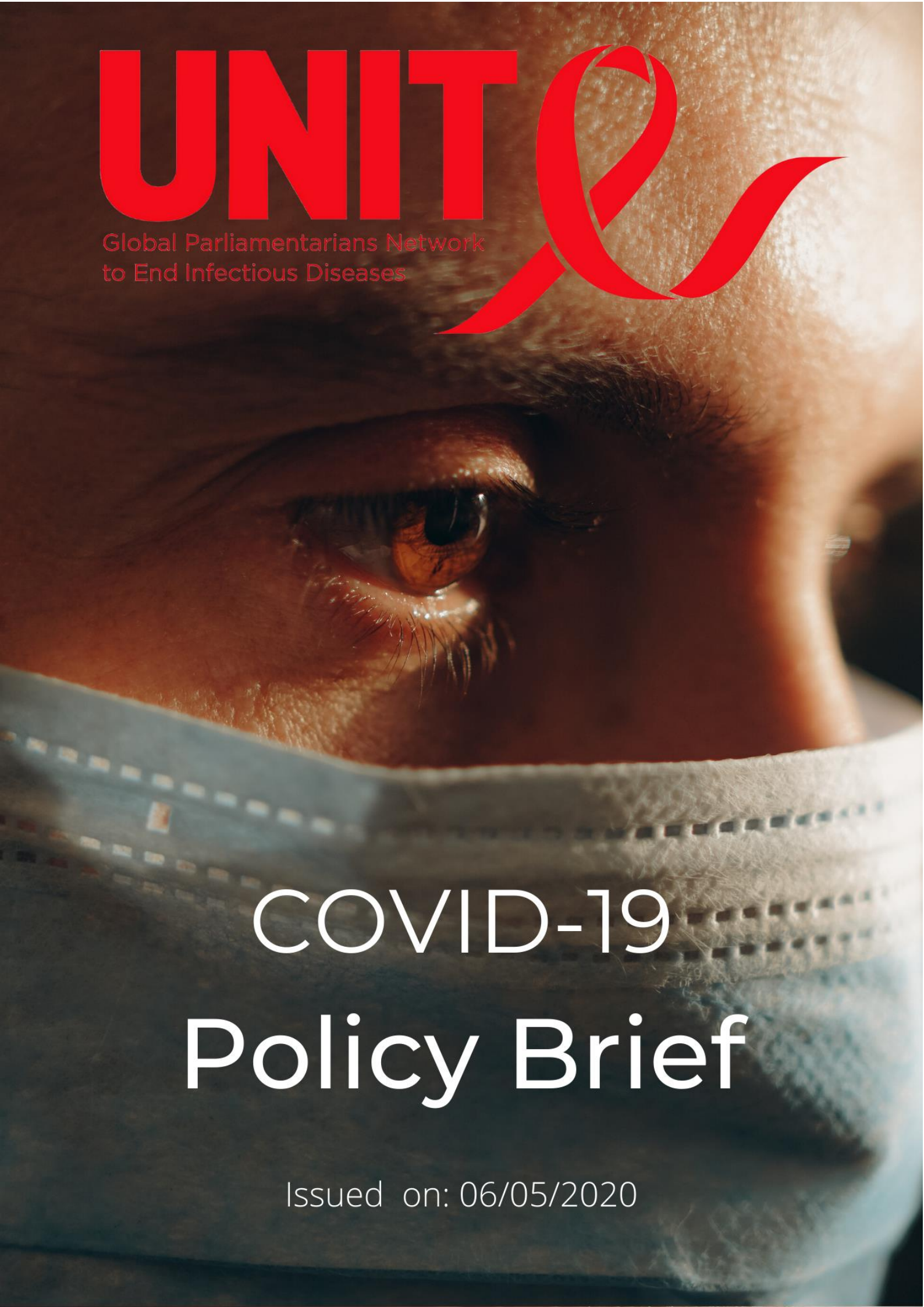

UNITE

Global Parliamentarians Network
to End Infectious Diseases

COVID-19
Policy Brief

Issued on: 06/05/2020

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This policy brief aims to provide decision makers with the most up-to-date evidence regarding actions that have been successful to handle the current pandemics, SARS-CoV-2. Although at this stage it is difficult to make conclusions, we can already provide some evidence regarding actions that seem to be more effective in managing the epidemics. In addition, we are also aware of the effectiveness of measures that might vary from country to country. Nevertheless, it is important to provide a set of actions to policy makers. So far, evidence shows Asia seems to have handled the outbreak better than Europe. Asian countries relied on the implementation of previously designed guidelines for H1N1, they acted rapidly, relied on actions based on social distancing and were able to rapidly develop a robust surveillance system, capable to detect and track cases ensuring the management of the surge. In addition, they provided health professionals with appropriated equipment and supplies. A massive stockpile of medical goods and equipment at an incredibly fast pace was also crucial to assure the safety their medical professionals. To date, evidence shows these actions have been well succeeded. As the pandemic evolves, more evidence is needed about which steps are needed for the right time. Although there is a need for more robust evidence, it is already well established that governments must have a global strategy which ultimately involves several stakeholders and implement a decentralized, coordinated and consistent response based on a set of scientifically based actions.

INTRODUCTION

On November 2019, a cluster of pneumonia cases, of unknown etiology, were reported by Chinese authorities in Wuhan city. The newly discovered disease, designated COVID-19, has spread alarmingly rapid to other countries, causing not only a major public health crisis, but disrupting global economic and social stability *(Shan Liu, 2020)*. As of May 3rd, there were a total of 3,349,786 cases of COVID-19 reported worldwide, accounting for 238,628 deaths and affecting 212 countries *(WHO, 2020)*.

Exponential numbers led the World Health Organization (WHO) to declare COVID-19, on January 30th, as a Public Health Emergency of international concern. By March 11th, COVID-19 was declared as a pandemic. Nations worldwide responded to these declarations with fair unanimity, but a fast and effective response has shown to be essential to delay the number of new cases in order to prevent healthcare systems from being overwhelmed or even collapsing.

The global scenario of the pandemic represents a challenge for communities, health systems and services, scientists, and ultimately disrupts the way political leaderships perceive global health. COVID-19 has impacted on businesses,

schools, tourism and in our personal lives. The current state of COVID-19 represents the remaking of a trust-building process in our elected representatives.

WHAT THE EVIDENCE SHOWS

Evidence shows that, regardless of the stage of the epidemic within countries, a few actions seem to decrease the number of infections. Yet, one must take into consideration the different settings in -middle and low-income countries. There is unanimous evidence about the success of a controlled and rigorous identification and attempted diagnosis of infections as well as contact tracing and isolation surveillance *(EU, 2020)* to *contain* the spread of infection. Such approaches were well succeeded in South Korea and Taiwan where the effects of testing of suspected cases as well as sophisticated surveillance system based on a early multiplayer approach and effective quarantine protocols led to a preventing further transmission of the virus among the community. *(Wang, 2020; Balila, 2020)*

In addition, widespread testing has also proved to be effective in reducing the virus within the community. Evidence regarding the effects of mass screening was shown by South Korea *(Ballila)* and Thailand allowing authorities to manage and slow down the surge *(Weatherby, 2020)*. However, mass testing works when implemented with contact tracing, which might turn to be a difficult task for countries who lack resources *(Cohen & Kupfershchmidt, 2020)*. The engagement of the population in adhering to social distance measures and community containment was also very effective in controlling the spread of the virus. *(Tanne et al, 2020)*. Such measures have been effective in the mitigation of the epidemics, as these provide hospitals with the support they need to maintain essential services as the virus spreads, and help those who are ill in the community to reduce the overall impact of the disease on society. The widespread use of face masks was also effective in Japan, South Korea and Singapore although this was not a stand-alone measure. *(Lee, Chiew and Khong, 2020)*

It is of common agreement that this pandemic can overwhelm health systems *(Legido-Quingley et al, 2020)*. However, health systems are different worldwide, thus evidence-based responses to alleviate the burden may not be effective for all countries. Still, successful responses like assuring a rapid provision of resources to healthcare settings, and in particular to health professionals, is paramount *(Tanne et al, 2020)* since it contributes to prevent the shortage of personnel within the healthcare setting.

Evidence for which actions to be carried out in the post pandemics are rare. One study suggested that extending or relaxing physical distancing control

measures in Wuhan might bring a second wave of cases. Thus, it is vital to keep vigilant and maintain the use of face masks, temperature checks, and contact tracing. *(Larsen et al, 2020)* Currently, there is a common understanding that a gradual release of lockdown is needed. However, there is limited evidence regarding the social and economic effects of the lockdown as well as which actions can mitigate the effects the most *(Maital, 2020)*. Nevertheless, it is vital to guarantee actions are taken based on the best evidence possible as it is well established the importance of evidence in policy making.

Last but not the least, studies from previous outbreaks have shown preparedness is key to minimize their impact. *(Sochas, Chanon and Nam, 2017)* An example comes from Taiwan, which has been able to respond better due to activation of preparedness plans that started during the SARS epidemic. This also highlights the importance of being prepared and learn from similar experiences.

To effectively battle the coronavirus, we must be pragmatic and non-partisan. The extreme circumstance calls for unity.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As a result, UNITE agrees on the following recommendations to fight SARS-CoV-2:

Containment actions[1]

1. To identify, test and isolate suspected cases of infection with SARS-CoV-2 by:
    - Providing a surveillance system, like contact tracing that tracks suspected cases;
    - Strengthening clinical preparedness and response, through the allocation of resources and staffing for care, testing, isolation and treating confirmed cases.
2. Improving surveillance and response efforts by establishing, or strengthening existing, national outbreak response mechanisms.
3. Divide suspected cases by order of most at risk of being infected, provide testing, tracking and enforce quarantine.

Mitigation actions[2]

[1] Containment actions aim to prevent the virus from spreading for as long as possible, such as detecting early cases and trying to establish who the infected person has been in contact with

[2] Mitigation actions are focused on mitigating the effects of the disease and reducing its spread, namely by minimizing associated mortality.

1. Guarantee widespread access to SARS-CoV-2 diagnostic tests.
2. Tailored actions and channels to promote and engage population in respecting social distance and isolation.
3. Consistently use of face mask, hand hygiene and coughing & sneezing etiquette.

Actions to alleviate the health system response

1. Prevent SARS-CoV-2 infection of health professionals by:
    - Providing resources and health equipment to all, especially in the healthcare setting, through enhanced joint work between public and private, health facilities, academia and industry.
    - Provide physical spaces to avoid cross-contamination between COVID and non COVID.
    - Assure equipment by easing procedures of acquisition by healthcare facilities.
2. Provide emergency phone lines and access to information by those in need, with tailored responses for the most vulnerable.

Post pandemic actions

1. Prepare in advance an Action Plan explaining how to execute the lockdown with economic and social measures.
    - Having multidisciplinary teams to assess impacts with different scenarios
    - Ensure economic and social measures that protect the most vulnerable (i.e ensure digitalization of social support); encourage actions to support business, protect employment and economic activity (benefits, fiscal measures); scale up of digitalization of activities and teleworking; strength support lines and actions to address mental health, due to stress and quarantine measures, especially in most vulnerable groups (health care professionals).
2. Global response
    - Strengthen global monitoring systems and implement a global security agenda.
    - Reinforce the need for funding for research of a vaccine and healthcare facilities.
    - Potentially find legal solutions for global development of the vaccine
3. Vaccine access

- Proactively ensure that legal provisions are in place to streamline the delivery of vaccines as soon as they become available.
    - This could include exploring policy change to allow indemnification of manufacturers, coupled with compensation schemes, as a prerequisite to address any liability issues of use of emergency medical countermeasures to avoid delayed access.
- Govern fair allocation for any vaccines that are produced; protecting those who are most vulnerable and ensuring priority access, regardless of ability to pay.
- Support infrastructure development to secure vaccine distribution
- Connect public health with economic factors step by step

AS A PARLIAMENTARIAN, IT IS IN YOUR HANDS TO:

1. *Pass legislation* that is based on the best scientific evidence and is timely. In this policy brief, we provide you with options for action:

    - leveraging legal procedures that allow the acquisition of rapid tests by local authorities to mass diagnose the population, especially those who are most at risk;
    - legislation that calls for the use of digital tools to do contact tracing, yet guarantees data protection;
    - and legislation that make the use of a face mask mandatory in public spaces. Do not underestimate them and take it into account in your country.

2. *Listen to your constituency*, represent them and ensure their needs are met in the parliament. From social work to employment, local trade to health services, ensure that the needs of the most vulnerable are met. This means a deep commitment with your local health authorities. *Understand local dynamics, know their population and health profile and resources* are key to implement rapid, adequate and effective actions with low cost. For example, key-population based communications engages and maximizes the effectiveness of delivered information.

3. *Develop working practices* that are in accordance with containment and mitigation strategies. Adopting remote working practice, virtual meetings, and keeping social distance in Parliament in case physical presence is required. Don´t forget the example starts at the top!

4. *Oversee and monitor* by making the executive and local authorities accountable for their actions, taken either during the pandemic either after. Inquiries and policy reviews can do the job!

5. *Promote and ensure the assessment* of policies and actions after the crisis. Post-lockdown recovery is essential for our mental health, our economy and health services. Assure that the emergency funds from your country are in line with your needs. If you need to advocate for more resources to international organisations, hold your government accountable. Assessments will lead to recommendations that can spare resources and lives in the future in similar outbreaks. Learn from experience!

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