

# Global and regional governance: Initial response to the COVID-19 pandemic

On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organization declared the spread of COVID-19 to be a pandemic, confirming the global impact of the disease. Across the world, regional and global international organisations are stepping up coordination to confront the medical crisis and mitigate its effects on economies, societies and individuals.

## Background

Having [characterised](#) COVID-19 as a pandemic, the first ever to be caused by a coronavirus, the World Health Organization (WHO) urged countries to 'detect, test, treat, isolate, trace and mobilise their people' and to [demonstrate](#) international solidarity in the face of the global health crisis. In its most basic [definition](#), a pandemic refers to the global spread of a new disease. According to epidemiology researchers at [Harvard University](#), 20 to 60 % of the global population could eventually be infected. At the time of writing, according to [data](#) from Johns Hopkins University, there have been over 860 000 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in the world and over 42 000 deaths, assuming that the data provided by governments around the world is accurate, a fact that has been [questioned](#). Large-scale epidemics pose a severe threat to human lives and constitute an enormous challenge to economies and to public health systems, testing the limits of governments' capacity and requiring a delicate [balance](#) between respect for international human rights norms and the need to implement restrictions.

Owing to the highly interconnected nature of the world, [experts](#) and international organisations, including the [United Nations](#), the [EU](#) and the [European Parliament](#), have called for coordinated responses at regional and global levels. The EU has, within the limits of its powers, [responded](#) to the virus by ensuring medical equipment is available, ramping up the search for a vaccine and helping Member States to withstand the social and economic impact. The G7 and G20 are continuing to coordinate their joint approach. While the extent to which regional organisations around the world are coordinating their responses to the pandemic varies, overall leaders have recognised the need to coordinate and cooperate in the face of the medical and public health emergency; to mitigate the effects of the pandemic on regional and global economies; to manage the movement of people for repatriation or epidemic containment reasons; to fight online disinformation regarding the virus; and to pool resources for the development of vaccines and treatments.

## Global: G7/G20 action

On 16 March, the leaders of the G7 [committed](#) to work together in the face of the global health crisis, by: coordinating action on necessary public health measures to protect people at risk from COVID-19; restoring confidence and growth, and protecting jobs; supporting global trade and investment; and encouraging science, research, and technology cooperation. They also agreed to call on the G20 to 'support and amplify' these efforts. The statement meanwhile urged the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank Group and other international organisations to further support countries worldwide. G7 health ministers were asked to coordinate on a weekly basis.

On 26 March, the G20 heads of state or government met in a virtual summit dedicated to addressing the coronavirus pandemic. In their ensuing [statement](#), the heads of the world's twenty leading economies committed to working with all relevant international organisations, including the WHO and the IMF, to confront the humanitarian, economic and social challenges posed by the pandemic. Some of the key points of the statement refer to: sharing scientific, and research and development information; expanding manufacturing capacity for medical supplies and ensuring availability to those in need; closing the financing gap in the [WHO Strategic Preparedness and Response Plan](#); facilitating trade and ensuring the flow of vital supplies and goods; and conducting 'bold and large scale' fiscal support. The leaders tasked the relevant officials with coordinating proportionate border-management measures in accordance with

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national regulations and providing assistance for repatriation. The statement echoed several of the [main points](#) put forward by the EU. Neither of the statements following the G7 and G20 summits addressed the issue of online disinformation regarding the virus however, in spite of senior officials having [stated](#) that the issue was discussed, at least within the G7. The EU's Rapid Alert System has been [used](#) to share knowledge with G7 partners on disinformation. Jointly the G20 are injecting over US\$5 trillion into the global economy as part of the measures to counteract the social, economic and financial impacts of the pandemic.

### Regional organisations: Initial meetings and decisions

#### Asia

On 10 March, the **ASEAN** finance ministers issued a [statement](#) on strengthening ASEAN's economic resilience in response to the outbreak of the COVID-19 coronavirus. On 13 March, ASEAN senior health officials [agreed](#) to sustain and further enhance a strong collective regional response to the pandemic. The **South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC)** Disaster Management Center launched a website to provide information about COVID-19. On 15 March, leaders and representatives of member countries held a video-conference to discuss containment measures for the virus.

#### Middle East and north Africa

The **Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)** held [meetings](#) at the level of finance ministers (23 March) and undersecretaries of health ministries (21 March) to discuss the issues relevant to the respective ministries. The finance ministries agreed to exchange information via reports on a weekly basis. Apart from cancelling the March 2020 Arab summit, the **Arab League** does not appear to have taken any joint action at the time of writing. [Experts](#) attribute the League's inability to address the coronavirus crisis to its design, which focuses on the preservation of sovereignty through unanimity.

#### Africa

In cooperation with the [African Centres for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#), on 20 March the **African Union (AU)** issued the [Africa continental strategy](#) for the COVID-19 pandemic. It aims to prevent severe illness and death, and to minimise social and financial disruption, by coordinating the efforts of states, AU agencies, the WHO and other partners; and by promoting evidence-based public health practice for the surveillance, prevention, diagnosis, treatment, and control of COVID-19. The AU [continent-wide approach](#) was launched in coordination with other African regional economic communities. Health ministers from the **ECOWAS** countries [agreed](#) to harmonise regional preparedness strategies for prevention, early detection and control of the coronavirus outbreak in coordination with the West African Health Organization. In the south, health ministers of the **Southern African Development Community (SADC)** [exchanged information](#) on the spread of the virus and agreed to coordinate preparedness and response.

#### Latin America

On 19 March, the Presidents of the **Mercosur** countries [decided](#) to coordinate and facilitate the return of nationals of member states to their countries of origin; to ensure the circulation of goods and services across borders; to consider the specific needs of communities in border regions; to consider the possibility of reducing tariffs on essential products and equipment; to share information and best practices and to coordinate with regional credit institutions (such as the Inter-American Development Bank and the Latin American Development Bank) with regard to the economic challenges generated by the health crisis. The statement echoed the [declaration](#) of the newly founded **Prosul**. The Prosul declaration also made reference to adopting measures to fight disinformation and fake news, and coordination of the joint procurement of medical equipment, within the framework of the Pan-American Health Organization.

#### Eurasia

On 19 February, members of the Council of Heads of Authorized Bodies in the Field of Sanitary and Epidemiological Welfare of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) States' Population [agreed](#) to exchange information on the spread of the pandemic. Following the expansion of the virus in the region, on 17 March the Council, as well as representatives from Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, [considered](#) anti-epidemic measures, including strengthening sanitary and quarantine controls, restricting movement of people across the border, restricting air traffic and monitoring people arriving from countries with adverse coronavirus situations. The importance of the supply of Russian laboratory diagnostic tools was emphasised.

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