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Q9

Critically examine the role of WHO in providing global health security during the COVID-19 pandemic.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2020 · GS II · 10 marks · Health, Education and Human Resources

Issues relating to development and management of Social Sector / Services relating to Health, Education, Human Resources.

Core demand of the question

- Critically examine the role of WHO in providing global health security during the Covid-19 pandemic
- Honour the official stem. Use IHR 2005, PHEIC, COVAX, and 2020 criticisms of delay and great-power capture - without denying operational value
- Keep the examination within a 10-mark length

Revision summary

- **WHO's COVID-19 role sits on IHR 2005:** alert, PHEIC, and technical guidance.

PHEIC on 30 January and pandemic on 11 March were late relative to spread.

Solidarity trials, ACT-A and COVAX were the operational plus.

Budget politics, China-related caution and Taiwan's exclusion hurt independence.

IHR cannot compel States; global health security is only as strong as members allow.

Introduction

The World Health Organization is the UN system's health-security hub under the **International Health Regulations, 2005**. COVID-19 in 2020 was the hardest test of that mandate. WHO informed, convened, and later helped COVAX, but it was slow to name a public-health emergency, cautious on human-to-human spread, and structurally weak against great-power politics.

Body**Mandate and what WHO did**

- IHR 2005 binds States to report public-health emergencies of international concern; WHO's Director-General declares a PHEIC and issues temporary recommendations.
- WHO issued technical guidance on testing, clinical care, and later mask advice; it ran Solidarity trials and the Access to COVID-19 Tools accelerator with partners.
- COVAX was the equity vehicle for vaccines; WHO's moral case for global health security is that a virus ignores borders.
- For developing States, WHO protocols were often the only public standard when bilateral science was noisy.

Critical failures in 2020

- The PHEIC came on 30 January 2020, after weeks of evidence; a pandemic was named only on 11 March. Delay cost preparedness.
- Early messaging tracked an information bottleneck around Wuhan and China; Taiwan's exclusion from the WHO room became a political scandal of the year.
- The US notice of withdrawal (2020) showed that WHO's budget dependence on assessed and voluntary funds lets a major donor punish the organisation mid-crisis.
- **IHR has weak enforcement:** WHO cannot compel a State to share samples, accept investigation, or keep trade measures proportionate.

Balanced examination

- WHO is a member-driven secretariat, not a world health police; blaming only Geneva hides State failure on PPE, lockdown timing, and vaccine nationalism.
- Global health security needed a faster alert, an independent origins probe, and a financed WHO that is not a hostage of one capital.
- **Recommendation:** strengthen IHR compliance, sustainable assessed contributions, and a pandemic treaty debate - the 2020 lesson, not the abandonment of WHO.

Flow diagram

IHR 2005 2005 -> PHEIC January 2020
PHEIC January 2020 -> Guidance Solidarity COVAX
Delay and donor politics -> Weak enforcement
Guidance Solidarity COVAX -> Global health security
Weak enforcement -> Global health security

Conclusion

WHO provided the only global operating system for COVID-19 guidance, trials, and vaccine equity talk, which is real health-security work. It failed on speed, independence from a major host State, and enforcement under IHR. A critical examination therefore reforms WHO; it does not pretend 2020 proved the organisation useless.

Facts & figures

International Health Regulations, 2005

Binding instrument on detection, reporting and public-health response at the border.

PHEIC, 30 January 2020

WHO declaration of a public-health emergency of international concern for COVID-19.

Pandemic declaration, 11 March 2020

Director-General's characterisation that framed national emergency law worldwide.

COVAX / ACT-A

Multilateral vaccine and tools platforms WHO co-led for equitable access.

US withdrawal notice, 2020

Political shock that exposed WHO's financial vulnerability in mid-pandemic.

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