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Institutionalizing Public Health Lessons from COVID-19

Bahram Sarmast[1*]

[1] Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Payame Noor University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran

*** Corresponding author email address**: sarmast@pnu.ac.ir

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A B S T R A C T

The COVID-19 pandemic revealed critical vulnerabilities in global and national public health systems, underscoring the urgent need to institutionalize lessons learned to enhance preparedness, equity, and resilience. This letter highlights key domains where reactive measures during the pandemic should now evolve into permanent, structured policy frameworks. These include embedding transparent communication protocols, formalizing community-level health governance, integrating mental health and equity considerations, and ensuring sustained global cooperation. Case examples demonstrate that institutional memory and participatory governance significantly enhance responsiveness during crises. Furthermore, the necessity of legal and structural mechanisms—such as mandatory After-Action Reviews (AARs), health security integration into development planning, and codified global vaccine equity frameworks—is emphasized as essential for long-term pandemic resilience. Rather than treating COVID-19 as an isolated event, policymakers must seize the opportunity to create enduring reforms that institutionalize best practices and protect populations from future public health emergencies.

Keywords: *Pandemic preparedness, Institutional memory, Health equity, Public health policy*

The COVID-19 pandemic functioned as an unprecedented stress test for global and national health systems, revealing strengths, exposing weaknesses, and producing a surge of real-time policy experiments. While many of these responses were reactive and shaped by crisis urgency, the necessity of transforming ad hoc improvisations into sustainable institutional reforms has now become apparent. To prevent history from repeating itself, public health lessons learned during COVID-19 must be deliberately and systematically institutionalized into policy frameworks, operational protocols, and governance mechanisms.

The early stages of the pandemic saw a scramble for personal protective equipment, inconsistent testing capacity, and fragmented data systems, even in high-income countries. In contrast, nations that had invested in preparedness infrastructure—such as Taiwan's integrated surveillance and community enforcement systems—were more resilient under pressure (1). The lesson here is not only

about capacity but about policy foresight. Institutionalizing preparedness involves embedding scalable systems, ensuring legal readiness for emergency powers, and maintaining surge capacity as a permanent feature of health governance.

An institutionalized approach requires more than infrastructure; it must include transparent, timely, and science-based communication strategies. Misinformation and lack of public trust were among the most damaging aspects of pandemic management. Studies from both developed and developing contexts highlight how trust in public health authorities, when lacking, exacerbated compliance challenges and reduced vaccine uptake (2, 3). This suggests the need for formalized crisis communication policies that ensure consistent messaging, backed by independent public health bodies insulated from political interference.

Institutionalizing public health responses also means preserving the collaborative structures and partnerships forged during COVID-19. The rapid development and rollout of vaccines were achieved through unprecedented cooperation between governments, international organizations, and the private sector. Yet, inequitable distribution and vaccine nationalism undermined global solidarity (4). To avoid repetition, future pandemic policies must codify multilateral cooperation, with enforceable obligations on resource sharing and transparent access protocols.

Moreover, the pandemic revealed the importance of community-level resilience and participatory governance. Case studies show that localized public health efforts—such as community tracing teams in Georgia or neighborhood-based outreach in the Philippines—proved more adaptive and responsive to local needs (5, 6). These experiences affirm the necessity of decentralizing certain health decisions while maintaining national coordination. Institutional frameworks must recognize the value of subsidiarity, giving local authorities tools and autonomy to act effectively in real time.

Mental health was another critical yet under-addressed domain. Health care workers faced burnout and trauma at alarming levels, especially in high-pressure environments with inadequate support structures (7). Similarly, institutionalized elderly populations experienced profound isolation, with long-term consequences for well-being and cognitive health (8, 9). Embedding mental health services into the fabric of emergency planning is a lesson still to be fully realized.

Inclusion is also vital. The pandemic highlighted pre-existing inequities, particularly among marginalized populations. Indigenous communities, people with disabilities, and low-income groups often found themselves at the intersection of structural neglect and pandemic vulnerability (10, 11). Policies aimed at future resilience must be equity-informed and include representation of diverse groups in all levels of health governance.

Furthermore, institutional memory must be cultivated. Lessons often dissipate once the crisis subsides. Countries such as Ethiopia have taken steps to embed these learnings by aligning health security planning with broader development strategies (12). Similarly, longitudinal studies in Germany suggest that public values such as solidarity and reciprocity can be mobilized into lasting civic engagement through policy scaffolding (13). These efforts should not remain isolated; a transnational effort to document and share institutional innovations would enhance collective resilience.

Lastly, formal After-Action Reviews (AARs) must become mandatory policy instruments, not optional reflections. The WHO and national health agencies have emphasized the value of AARs in identifying policy gaps and capacity shortfalls. However, in many regions, these reviews lack the legal authority to drive reform (6). Institutionalizing these mechanisms within national legislative frameworks would ensure accountability and continuous improvement.

To summarize, COVID-19 was not only a crisis but a policy wake-up call. Governments, international bodies, and civil society must now move beyond emergency responses to structural integration. The goal is to prevent reactive improvisation and instead nurture resilient, anticipatory, and equitable public health systems. Institutionalizing lessons from COVID-19 is not merely an option—it is an ethical imperative for safeguarding global health in the 21st century.

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