

Credibility Deficit: The WHO in the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Exactly a decade ago, one of us wrote a commentary on the WHO in light of the outbreaks of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and A/H1N1. It argued that the WHO had become the most powerful international organisation in the world. 'Power' is defined as the ability to perform and act effectively to get a desired outcome, in which legitimacy is the key (<https://jech.bmj.com/content/64/2/97>). As the global health organisation, the WHO advisories have proven to be remarkably influential during the SARS and the A/H1N1 outbreaks. A decade on, however, the WHO is now suffering a credibility deficit. One has to wonder why the reputation and credibility of the organisation is now open to dispute. This legitimacy crisis is attributable to three particular concerns over how the health organisation has handled the COVID-19 pandemic.

1. What the WHO is supposed to do?

The WHO has numerous functions and one of the most noticeable ones is to marshal global collective responses to major epidemics. As a functional organisation, the WHO has the authority to give advice to member states based on available scientific data and evidence. It acts as a global hub of information and provides leadership when joint action is needed in responding to any disease with global concern (<https://www.who.int/about/role/en/>).

Before the new International Health Regulations (IHR) was adopted by the World Health Assembly (WHA) in 2005, the WHO could only use the information and sources provided by governments of member states. However, the 2002-03 SARS outbreak demonstrated the obsolescence of this Westphalian principle of health governance. The new IHR (2005) (<https://www.who.int/ihr/publications/9789241580496/en/>) has empowered the organisation to include information from non-state actors or civil society organisations, such as grass-roots organisations on the ground. The major purpose of this revision is to prevent any cover-ups by member states and allow the WHO to assess the ground situation more accurately. In addition, under the IHR (2005), member states have a duty to respond promptly to a public health emergency of international concern (PHEIC). States are required to report any potential PHEIC to the WHO within 24 hours. This world health institution is supposed to take evidence-based decisions with regard to PHEIC and offer policy recommendations.

2. *The WHO serving the Chinese government?*

The WHO has left many observers an impression that it functions as an instrument of the Chinese government in the current Covid-19 pandemic. After Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus's visit to Beijing and meeting with Xi Jinping in late January 2020, he praised Beijing's commitment and transparency lavishly. This is most notable when one reads the Chinese account of the visit. According to the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Tedros said, 'it is admirable that the Chinese government has shown its solid political resolve and taken timely and effective measures in dealing with the epidemic.' In addition, he expressed that 'President Xi's personal guidance and deployment show his great leadership capability' and 'China has released information in an open and transparent manner, identified the pathogen in a record-short time and shared the genetic sequence of the novel coronavirus in a timely manner with the WHO and other countries' (https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1737014.shtml).

Tedros not only heaped his unqualified praise on China's Covid-19 policy measures and Xi's leadership, but also displayed his deference to China's governance system. He, in particular, commended 'China's efficiency and the advantages of China's system' and hence 'the experience of China is worth learning for other countries'. Obviously the WHO did not review critically the reliability of the information and data transmitted by China and took them at face value. Tedros and WHO experts were seen to have known little about China's political system in which non-transparency and censorship are prevalent. The WHO was also uncritical of the human rights concerns about the Chinese measures of lockdown and contact tracing (<https://thediplomat.com/2020/03/china-fighting-covid-19-with-automated-tyranny/>). WHO compliments have been used by Beijing as part of its official propaganda.

Bruce Aylward, former assistant director-general of the WHO and currently a senior advisor to it, also caused an uproar. His awkward handling in March (2020) of a Radio Television of Hong Kong reporter's question about Taiwan's status in the WHO – he first said that he could not hear the question clearly and then appeared to hang up the call when the reporter repeated the question (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/30/senior-who-adviser-appears-to-dodge-question-on-taiwans-covid-19-response>) – only strengthens the impression that the WHO is under undue influence of China. While Tedros accused Taiwan people and government of casting racist slurs against him in April, which was denied by Taiwan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (https://www.mofa.gov.tw/en/News_Content.aspx?n=1EADDCFD4C6EC567&s=E85FCB90DABFF971), he has not criticised China of the racial discrimination against Africans living in China, especially in Guangzhou, during the virus outbreak

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/04/17/why-cant-world-do-better-job-calling-out-racism-china/>).

Questions about this pandemic that the WHO must address or answer abound. They include: Did it delay the announcement of PHEIC under China's pressure until after Tedros's visit to Beijing? Was its advice against travel restrictions also made under China's pressure, as China went to great pains to create a business-as-usual image? Was the WHO aware of the reports that Chinese scientists had identified the nature of the novel virus between late December 2019 and early January 2020, two weeks before China shared the genome sequence with the rest of the world? China's *Caixin Global* (<https://www.caixinglobal.com/2020-02-29/in-depth-how-early-signs-of-a-sars-like-virus-were-spotted-spread-and-throttled-101521745.html>) reported in late February 2020 – reprinted in Singapore's *Straits Times* (<https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/how-early-signs-of-the-coronavirus-were-spotted-spread-and-throttled-in-china>) – that experts in China's genomics laboratories succeeded in sequencing the virus and discovered that it was very similar to the deadly SARS coronavirus in late December 2019, but they were ordered by Chinese officials to cease further testings, destroy the samples and not disclose their findings. A team headed by Wuhan Institute of Virology's Shi Zhengli, known as China's 'Bat Woman', also confirmed the similarity between the two viruses (<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/curse-of-the-bat-woman-what-went-on-in-wuhan-lab-pxmws0pzt>), but their findings were suppressed (<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8210951/Beijing-authorities-hushed-findings-Chinese-scientist.html>). In early January 2020, Zhang Yongzhen of Fudan University, Shanghai and his team came to the same conclusion from the sample they received from Wuhan that the virus is of the coronavirus family. The results of Zhang's team were published in the periodical *Nature* in early February 2020 (<https://www.nature.com/articles/s41586-020-2008-3.pdf>), but Zhang's laboratory was later ordered to close (<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/society/article/3052966/chinese-laboratory-first-shared-coronavirus-genome-world-ordered>).

As the novel virus was found to be similar to SARS, it strongly suggested that human-to-human transmission would be highly possible. But China did not admit to it openly until 20 January 2020 after a lapse of about three weeks, and more importantly, not take steps to enforce 'social distancing' measures, including cancellation of mass gathering, and to restrict population movement within, towards and out of Wuhan until 23 January. Instead the Wuhan municipal government hosted a Chinese New Year banquet for 40,000 families on 18 January (<https://www.ft.com/content/fa83463a-4737-11ea-aeb3-955839e06441>), and about five million people had left Wuhan before the lockdown (<https://www.businessinsider.com/5-million-left->

[wuhan-before-coronavirus-quarantine-2020-1?r=US&IR=T](#)). These all encouraged the spread of the disease to other parts of the country and abroad.

These evidences all point out that the Chinese health authorities were well informed of the nature of the novel virus between late December 2019 and early January 2020, but they and other local officials were seen to pay more attention to containing the spread of the vital information on the virus – the most typical examples being the censorship on Dr Li Wenliang ([https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(20\)30382-2/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(20)30382-2/fulltext)) and Dr Ai Fen (<https://www.bizpacreview.com/2020/04/05/the-final-interview-from-chinas-missing-doctor-ai-fen-who-provided-the-whistle-to-blow-905277>); <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/11/coronavirus-wuhan-doctor-ai-fen-speaks-out-against-authorities>) – than to reining in the spread of the virus. The WHO should have followed up with these mass media reports to probe into whether there was a governmental cover-up of the outbreak. At issue is why, contrary to the essence of the IHR (2005), the current WHO leadership almost entirely relies on the ‘official’ information conveyed by the Chinese government while various reports from non-state actors inform that the Chinese authorities have imposed strict censorship on experts.

3. Credibility: Who complies with WHO advice?

Because the WHO is seen to be under undue sway of China, various countries are sceptical about its policy advices. A sign of a loss of the WHO’s credibility is that many countries did not follow its ‘no travel restriction’ advice. Not only did the US defy it (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/proclamation-suspension-entry-immigrants-nonimmigrants-persons-pose-risk-transmitting-2019-novel-coronavirus/>), Russia, a good friend of China, also swiftly closed its Far East borders with China at the end of January (<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/01/30/russia-closes-far-east-border-over-coronavirus-a69100>). Australia followed suit and began to impose travel restrictions on visitors from China on 1 February (<https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/minister/marise-payne/media-release/updated-travel-advice-protect-australians-novel-coronavirus>). Even China currently does not pay heed to this advice when it is not in its interest to do so (<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/society/article/3077355/coronavirus-beijings-ban-foreign-travellers-comes-force-months>).

A further test of its independence and credibility is whether it is able to muster the political will to lead an independent international inquiry into the origin and spread of the virus, focusing on the

unanswered questions of who was China's 'patient zero' and when and how s/he got infected (<https://www.newscientist.com/article/mg24532764-000-the-hunt-for-patient-zero-where-did-the-coronavirus-outbreak-start/>). Although it is widely believed that the outbreak originated in Wuhan's Hua'nan Seafood Wholesale Market, which also sold wildlife animals (<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/animals/2020/04/coronavirus-linked-to-chinese-wet-markets/>), according to an article in *The Lancet* in January 2020 ([https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(20\)30183-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(20)30183-5)), written by a group of Chinese scientists, three out of the first four identified Covid-19 patients had no link or contact with the market, suggesting that there were more than one source and path of infection. While Australia is behind the global investigation (<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-04-19/payne-calls-for-inquiry-china-handling-of-coronavirus-covid-19/12162968>; <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-australia/australia-says-all-who-members-should-support-a-proposed-coronavirus-inquiry-idUSKCN225041>) and such an inquiry may help find how to stop the pandemic from happening again in the future and end the mounting speculation about the alleged relationship between Wuhan laboratories and Covid-19 (https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/how-china-can-end-the-covid-19-conspiracy-theories-before-they-get-worse/2020/04/23/4999a93a-8586-11ea-878a-86477a724bdb_story.html), whether the WHO can overcome China's expressed opposition to such an international investigation (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-china-52420536>) is a moot point.