

Enhancing Public–Private Cooperation in Epidemic Preparedness and Response

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The threat of epidemics and pandemics has increased as our world has become more interconnected. Recent epidemics have highlighted the need for increased investment in preparedness and the critical role of the private sector in health system strengthening and preparedness. Our manuscript seeks to bring attention to and promote public–private collaboration in global health preparedness by discussing areas on which public and private organizations can focus their efforts to improve partnerships. It does this by expanding on themes discussed at a conference on public–private partnerships in pandemic preparedness, Ready Together. We hope that this article will encourage effective partnerships.

KEY WORDS: epidemic, preparedness, partnerships

Background

Our interconnected world has witnessed an increase in infectious disease outbreaks with epidemic or pandemic potential, including the current spread of Ebola and MERS-CoV. Yet despite clear evidence that prevention is more cost effective than response, we remain trapped in a cycle of panic and neglect, throwing money at disease events whenever they occur, but failing to sustain investment in preparedness when the panic subsides (World Bank, 2017). We are now in a period of neglect, as world leaders turn their attention to other urgent issues, and investment in vulnerable health systems languishes (Yamey et al., 2017). The private sector, the sector that is nongovernmental and is run for profit, has a critical role to play in response to an epidemic, but the community also needs to play a role in health system strengthening and preparedness. In fact, we argue that sound stewardship and risk management demands that the private sector play a role in mitigating the very real health and economic risks associated with unpredictable, but completely expectable outbreaks. Further, the expertise, capabilities, and resources of private sector organizations offer significant opportunities for raising awareness, building community resilience, strengthening disease surveillance, and capitalizing on medical innovations

(World Economic Forum, 2018a). While infectious disease outbreaks have historically been characterized by reactive, *ad hoc*, and underutilized private sector contributions, we know that we can do much better.

In the fall of 2017, a group of leading voices in health security, global health financing, technology, civil society, and the private sector came together to discuss the state of the world’s readiness to fight the next epidemic or pandemic (Management Sciences for Health, 2018). The attendees reflected on the financial, economic, and other risks to the private sector associated with major disease outbreaks; best practices for successful public–private cooperation; innovations in medical countermeasures that will contribute to public safety and population health; and overcoming barriers to whole-of-society collaborations to enhance global health security and community resilience. Out of these discussions, four key themes developed. Below, we present the themes and explain why they represent critical issues for global public health and private sector leaders to address if we are to be better prepared for future epidemics and pandemics.

Quantifying Risk and Vulnerability

First, quantifying and communicating commercial vulnerability to infectious disease risk is a critical step for more effective and widespread private sector engagement. The most conservative estimates suggest that a severe pandemic could reduce global GDP by as much as 1.0 percentage point, which is on par with the threat of climate change (Sands, 2018). In light of this financial risk, the private sector has a vested interest in collaborating with in-country partners to fortify local health systems and strengthen public health infrastructure. Private entities can and should be more than just financiers. Over 150 companies participated in the 2014–2016 Ebola response, and more than 20 percent of their contributions leveraged expert skills, services, or local capacity (World Economic Forum and the Boston Consulting Group, 2015). Private companies contributed extensive resources to the transport of supplies, the construction of Ebola treatment units, community awareness campaigns, and the preparation of burial grounds, drawing on their local knowledge of communities and culture as well as their existing relationships with key decision makers (World Economic Forum and the Boston Consulting Group, 2015). Continued private sector engagement can help empower local communities to become effective first responders to future infectious disease outbreaks (United States Agency for International Development [USAID], 2016). To this end, the World Economic Forum (WEF) is developing a first-of-its-kind “dashboard” to enable business leaders to better understand expected costs associated with infectious disease outbreaks, as well as pathways for public–private cooperation to mitigate these costs (WEF, 2018b).

Building Trust and Lines of Communication

Second, while best practices for public–private cooperation are evolving, it is becoming increasingly clear that trust, communication, and early relationship

building determines how well public–private partnerships function. Effective collaboration and knowledge integration cannot occur without established networks, communication lines, protocols, and information-sharing infrastructure (Management Sciences for Health, 2018). Public–private partnerships have the potential to strengthen community resilience in many ways: strategically, they reduce the burden on the public sector to meet essential needs, which allows governments to shift their focus to other strategic priorities; operationally, the diversity of supply sources allows the public sector to respond more effectively to changing community needs; and tactically, the pooling of public and private resources significantly improves the efficiency of outbreak response (Busch & Givens, 2013). To optimize the effectiveness of these partnerships, expectations regarding roles, responsibilities, division of labor, frequency of communication, and scope of information sharing should be established early on, ideally before the outbreak, and partnerships formed during emergencies should be preserved.

Recognize Unique Capabilities

Another critical component of public-private cooperation is disaggregating the private sector into different groups, and recognizing their unique capabilities. In-country operators, for example, beyond just being motivated by business continuity concerns, are likely to have a desire to protect employees and a sense of responsibility to the communities in which they operate. Therefore, they can often leverage significant local relationships, capacity, and knowledge to co-execute response activities and influence key local leaders. Multinational firms, on the other hand, while having some of the same motivations, can bring other types of expertise such as supply chain, and the ability to tap capital markets for investments (Management Sciences for Health, 2018). For example, during the Ebola outbreak, UPS, FedEx, Agility, and Maersk supported public sector efforts to transport medical supplies and health workers and a vast array of pharmaceutical firms (often in conjunction with a public agency) commenced or resumed research and development into Ebola diagnostics, antiviral therapies, and vaccines (World Economic Forum and the Boston Consulting Group, 2015).

It is clear that targeted capacity building through unique public–private partnerships can reduce the social and economic costs of infectious disease outbreaks and these efforts should be strengthened before the next epidemic. The Global Health Security Agenda’s (GHS) Private Sector Roundtable (PSRT) is convening private sector actors from around the world to support countries in strengthening global health security. Moving forward, one way to continue to engage the private sector is to conduct large-scale simulation exercises involving a broad range of stakeholders to identify critical gaps, bottlenecks, and inefficiencies that can be addressed using the private sector’s unique capabilities.

Strong Platforms

Finally, we need strong institutional platforms to foster the public–private partnerships that will deliver critical innovations for global health security (Hagel, 2017; World Bank, 2017). The Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI), for example, was formed in recognition of the fact that future epidemics will require a more efficient and sustainable model for vaccine development. CEPI’s “just-in-case” approach identifies priority vaccines to develop in advance of the next outbreak, based on expert assessments of pathogenic outbreak potential, and the technical feasibility of vaccine interventions. This model hopes to yield higher social returns on research and development by providing more timely and affordable health innovations in areas where market incentives have failed (Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness, 2018).

Motivating all of society to focus on and care about global health security is a challenge. Complacency and competing priorities lead to insufficient political support to tackle big challenges (Gostin & Ó Cathaoir, 2018). There are other challenges as well: duplication and fragmentation, liability concerns, lack of timely and accurate information and data-sharing, and poor assessment of risks and vulnerabilities across sectors. These challenges, tied with complacency, result in substantial funding challenges for global health security. Initiatives such as the Pandemic Supply Chain Network and the PSRT, however, are making an effort to mobilize industry support in these areas, emphasizing that doing so will be good for customers, employees, and business (Rabin, 2018; Pandemic Supply Chain Network, n.d.). The increase in such initiatives reflects a growing recognition that outbreak response is most effective when all sectors of society are engaged, and able to contribute resources and expertise. Risk mitigation cannot be effective without a “whole-of-society” approach to addressing the social and cultural contexts in which infectious disease outbreaks occur, and persist.

As we look ahead, it is clear that public–private cooperation will continue to be a critical component of pandemic preparedness and response. More public sector entities must learn to effectively engage with nontraditional partners, recognize their unique contributions and capabilities, and incorporate them into their plans for preparedness and response. The conference convened this past fall, called Ready Together, is only the beginning of a broader shift towards greater engagement in global health security. This is a call to action for the private sector to become more deeply engaged, for the public sector to reach out in full cooperation, and for global health actors to recognize that they form part of an expanding global health security community. Each day, this community produces more evidence of the risks, impact, and unmet needs associated with infectious disease outbreaks, and this evidence must continuously be shared with political leaders, health officials, and other stakeholders to ensure that when faced with the next epidemic or pandemic, we are ready . . . together.

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Notes

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