

ICC STATEMENT
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COVID-19 PANDEMIC: LESSONS FOR INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH COLLABORATION AND INFORMATION EXCHANGE

ICC applauds the World Health Organization's (WHO) landmark global collaboration bringing together the public and private sector to accelerate development, production and equitable global access to new COVID-19 essential health technologies. Multilateral and multistakeholder cooperation is—and will continue to be—crucial to support the rapid development and deployment of safe and effective COVID-19 diagnostics, therapeutics and vaccines, and ensure equitable global access to these.

The COVID-19 pandemic has spotlighted the crucial need for international scientific collaboration in both the public and private sectors to develop diagnostics, vaccines and treatments in order to tackle health emergencies. This requires open exchange of, and rapid access to, samples and information.

Open and timely access to genome sequences of the emerging coronavirus enabled global collaboration in the scientific community and an early start to develop diagnostics, vaccines and treatments against COVID-19. From the day of the outbreak's first report, it took little more than a week for the WHO to confirm existence of the new coronavirus, then less than 24 hours from the first coronaviruses being sequenced by Chinese public health laboratories, to full genome data being publicly shared on GISAID¹ EpiCoV™ database, a public-private-partnership.

The rapid sharing of the coronavirus genetic sequence worldwide enabled real-time progress in the understanding of the new COVID-19 disease and allowed scientists around the world in public and private sector research to immediately start working on candidate medical countermeasures. This immediate international mobilisation, often through cross-border collaborations, was built on existing cooperation between public and private sector scientists across the world who regularly pool resources, skills and knowledge to develop global scientific solutions.

The real time response to the COVID-19 pandemic was built on a solid foundation of existing knowledge, treatments and tools. This results from previous research, highlighting the importance of maintaining and supporting international research collaborations and open access and exchange of information on an ongoing basis, and not only during emergency situations. Open access databases are foundational to this on-going exchange and collaboration.

Much has been said about the importance of maintaining production and cross-border flows of essential medicines and goods. Less visible, but as important, is the necessity of maintaining research infrastructure and the cross-border flow of knowledge, information and research collaboration.

While the current emergency relates directly to human health, the same considerations hold true for plant and animal health emergencies; key crops like maize, bananas, coffee and tomatoes are presently seriously threatened by plant diseases in certain regions.

¹ GISAID was launched in 2008, originally as the Global Initiative on Sharing All Influenza Data, because access to the latest genetic data for highly pathogenic H5N1 influenza zoonotic infections was often restricted, in part due to the hesitancy by WHO Member States (WHO MS) to share their virus genomes. www.gisaid.org

To support on-going private and public research efforts to counter the coronavirus, as well as to prepare against future epidemics harming human, animal and plant health, it will be important to:

- > Continue to support and strengthen international networks of research collaborations within the global research community, including both private and public sector scientists, and ensure that research cooperation is maintained even in the context of national political differences.
- > Ensure that policies and regulations do not hinder effective, timely, cross-border access to and exchange of scientific information, data and physical samples. Timely open exchange and access to information and samples is fundamental to ensuring that public and private sector research yields results with the speed necessary to respond to a health emergency.
- > Ensure continued open and unencumbered exchange of, and access to, genetic sequences. Care must be taken not to impose regulations at national and international level that would undermine the open information exchange and legal certainty necessary to international scientific collaboration and research in both the private and public sector. Open exchange and access to genetic sequence data has played an essential role in accelerating and broadening public and private research efforts on diagnostics, treatments and vaccines for the COVID-19 pandemic, and is crucial to many R&D activities today.
- > Facilitate and support international research collaborations and information exchange on an ongoing basis to build the necessary foundation for tackling future emergencies and more globally diverse research capacity. Research in emergency situations is more effective in addressing the crisis at hand if it can build on a thorough foundation of existing knowledge and draw on international R&D networks spread throughout different regions.

The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the importance of cross-border scientific collaborations within and between the public and private sector, and the effective and timely global exchange of scientific information, samples and materials. International cross-border scientific collaboration including between public and private researchers should be supported, and policies and regulations that could hinder this international collaboration and exchange avoided. Pathogens and epidemics do not respect borders; solutions to combat these can only be found through global research cooperation and open exchange.