

Learning the lessons from Covid-19

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The Covid-19 pandemic is the most important threat to global public health in more than 100 years. The pandemic severely tested international agreements and institutions responsible for protecting international health.¹ Right Honourable Helen Clark and Her Excellency Ellen Johnson Sirleaf Co-Chaired the Independent Panel for Pandemic Preparedness and Response which examined the global response to the pandemic.

In May 2022, they released their one year report *Transforming or Tinkering?*² Inaction lays the groundwork for another pandemic. The panel identified several gaps in the global outbreak response and made important recommendations in order to better respond to future pandemics. There are serious gaps in the global arrangement for preventing and containing outbreaks of global significance.

The Small Islands Developing States (SIDS) in the Pacific region were widely regarded to have been largely successful in minimising the negative public health impacts of Covid-19. Pacific SIDS were able to delay the introduction of Covid-19 until they were able to vaccinate most of their people and implement broader public health measures. It is unclear what plans are in place to review the regional and national responses to Covid-19 in the region.

In Aotearoa/New Zealand, the Government has just announced a Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Covid-19 Pandemic response. A Royal Commission is the highest level of investigation available to the Government. It will look at lessons learned and aims to help Aotearoa/New Zealand better prepare for future pandemics. Findings from the investigation will be of enormous value to Maori and Pacific people in particular given the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on their communities. There is no Pacific person in the three-person Commission.

Overall, the New Zealand response was regarded as one of the best in the world. Unfortunately, the national response did not adequately address the

impact of the outbreak on the most vulnerable communities, including Maori and Pacific people. Despite early and consistent evidence of the disproportionate impact of Covid-19 on these communities, the national response failed to fully engage Maori and Pacific leaders and providers and the 'one size fits all' ethos was apparent. The Waitangi Tribunal report 'Haumarū: The Covid-19 Priority Report' provides an excellent summary of the gaps in the national response for Maori. It is noted that these findings apply in equal measure to Pacific people.

The disproportionate impact of Covid-19 on Maori and Pacific people is not a surprise. Socioeconomic circumstances, higher prevalence of underlying medical conditions and difficulties with access to health care are thought to be the main factors responsible for the impact of Covid-19 on Maori and Pacific people. Aotearoa/New Zealand has not dealt with ethnic inequities in health for decades.

In the 1918 Influenza Pandemic, there were inconsistencies in the way the country responded to the crisis. Maori were disproportionately affected with the death rate six times higher than Non-Maori. In the aftermath of the pandemic, the 1920 Health Act was adopted. Many of the elements reported in the 1918 pandemic were present in the Covid-19 outbreak.

It is important for the Commission to ensure that a robust process is in place to ensure that Pacific communities are able to share their experiences.

REFERENCES

- 1 Independent Panel for Preparedness and Response. Main Report - The Independent Panel for Pandemic Preparedness and Response. *Rep 12052021* 2021. <https://theindependentpanel.org/mainreport/>.
- 2 Sirleaf EJ, Clark H. *Transforming or Tinkering?* 2022 <https://live-the->

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