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THREE YEARS WITH THE PANDEMIC CENTRE

For the third consecutive year, the Pandemic Centre is proud to present its annual activity report for 2023. Over the past year, we expanded our research activity, welcoming a new postdoctoral researcher, a one-year visiting Fulbright student, and several master’s students to the Centre. We increased our teaching activity through regular Research Catalyst meetings and offering our now well-established PhD course. We also worked to further disseminate knowledge, foster interdisciplinarity and increase preparedness awareness through monthly Pandemic Breakfasts, several workshops, and our annual research conference in October.

Following our strategy for 2023 to build bridges with international centers doing work similar to our own, we visited and have been visited by experts from the Netherlands to Nepal; as any center working on pandemics should be, we have propelled the Pandemic Centre to the international arena.

The following pages include more details about our activities, our fantastic and generous strategic group, efficient staff communicating with administration and our tireless PhD candidates. As the director of the Pandemic Centre, I am grateful to all of the people who make our work possible.

The Pandemic Centre envisions a society that is better prepared to predict and cope with future pandemics. Learning from the past four years, we know that important steps for preparedness must be taken now. In a world that is constantly moving from one crisis to the next, with competing priorities and interests, we ask: will Norway still have the time, energy and resources to learn from the COVID-19 pandemic?

The COVID-19 pandemic is now history; in a few years it will merely be a story. What will we tell our children and grandchildren? We will tell them bedtime stories that seem otherworldly: masked people who walked down deserted streets, remaining one meter away from all other humans they happened upon.
People who could not visit their families for Christmas or even attend funerals for their loved ones. Grateful to be unmasked and within a one-meter radius, our children will look at us with big, worried eyes. Some of them will ask if these stories may once again become reality.

We will have to answer honestly: “No” will not be an option, because we know that pandemics are inevitable. So, we will start with, “Yes, but…” The decisions we make today will determine how our answer ends. Will the answer be that of the giraffe – who demonstrates foresight, resilience, and perseverance – saying, “Yes, but we have learned a lot since COVID-19 and we will be better prepared if another pandemic strikes”? Or will the answer be that of the ostrich – who avoids problems but ultimately faces greater danger down the line – saying, “Yes, but we hope it does not happen for a long time. Just don’t think about it”? Giraffe or ostrich? The choice is now. The Pandemic Centre will keep working for the giraffe’s answer, despite the poor ostriches, as hiding their heads turns out to be a mirage of safety.

In this effort, we need all of you with us: academics who continue studying the pandemic’s long-lasting impacts, healthcare providers who systematically review and update our preparedness plans, policymakers who prioritize their substitutes, and society at large, which continues to understand and demonstrate the value of working together for a more resilient future. Let us become wiser and more prepared for health crises by collaborating and coordinating for years to come.

Esperanza Diaz
Leader of the Pandemic Centre
Leder Pandemisenteret
Leadership and Steering Committee

ESPERANZA DIAZ
Leder Pandemic Centre
Professor Faculty of Medicine

REBECCA COX BROKSTAD
Professor
Representative Faculty of Medicine

TEEMU SAKARI RYYMIN
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*The positions for Magnus Vollset (20%) and Oddvar Kårboe (10%) are financed through a donation from Agnethe Harbitz
Master’s Students & others students affiliated with the Centre

MARTA-JOHANNE SVENDESEN
Master’s student at Faculty of Psychology

TARTEEL ABDALLAH
Master’s student at Faculty of Social Sciences

DOUA AHMED
Master’s Student at Centre of International Health

SAI HARISH ADARI
Master’s Student at Centre of International Health

SOLVEIG VEDERHUS & EIRIK MYHRE
Medical Students, Faculty of Medicine

LEAH ELIZA BALTER
Fulbright-Student, Baltimore USA

Researchers and administrators of the Pandemic Centre celebrating Christmas at the Department’s Christmas Party.
The Pandemic Centre organized a total of six breakfast meetings in 2023. In these monthly meetings taking place at Alrek Health Cluster, researchers studying themes related to pandemics present the findings of their projects in duets, combining different disciplines, from psychology to mathematics. The goal is to inspire collaboration and exchange between disciplines in order to understand pandemics from multiple perspectives. The research topics presented at the breakfast meetings were:

26th of January

How did VIZRT, Bergen based software company address the COVID-19 pandemic, Camilla Øyjordsbakken HR Business Partner I VIZRT

How well prepared the emergency medical services were to handle the COVID-19 pandemic, Vivian Midtbø, NORCE

23rd of February

How to communicate news related to the corona virus pandemic in Norwegian Sign Language, Casper Lund, Supervissuell AS

Navigating Crisis: Lessons from Norway’s Response to COVID-19, Johannes Sandvik Førde UiB

23rd of March

Data-tool to have an overview of the infection control measures during the pandemic, Truc Trung Nguyen, Norwegian Institute of Public Health (FHI)

Emotional Eating and Changes in High-Sugar Food and Drink Consumption Linked to Psychological Distress and Worries: Elaheh Javadi Arjmandm, Department of Public Health and Primary Care

25th of May

How vaccine skepticism and hesitation can be reduced among various immigrant groups in Norway, Prabhjot Kour, Pandemic Centre

Counter-narratives about COVID-19, Tove Ingebjørg Fjell from the Faculty of Humanities at UiB

24th of August

How concern about climate change changed from January 2020 to January 2021, Thea Gregersen, NORCE

Sleep patterns among Norwegian nurses during the first and second waves of the pandemic, Siri Waage, Department of Social Psychology, UiB

7th of December

How knowledge-based artificial intelligence can be used to model “infodemics”, Monica Patrascu, Center for Aging and Nursing Home Medicine (SEFAS)

“Bergen in Change” (BIE) study, Lars T. Fadnes, Department of Global Health and Public Health at UiB
It’s really important to have a Pandemic Centre in Bergen. I was very inspired by attending the Pandemic Breakfast, and think that all good forces must join to learn from what must be improved. This is definitely something I would like to attend several times.

Helen Koldal, Senior Advisor, Bergen Municipality
LONG-TERM CONSEQUENCES OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON SOCIETY

On the 27th of October 2023, the Pandemic Centre organized its 3rd annual conference at the Bergen Public Library. This was the first time the conference was set in an international context, with guests coming from both Norway and abroad. The topic for the conference was “Long term consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on society”.

A total 27 abstracts were submitted from countries including Norway, Italy, France, Nepal and Sri Lanka and were presented either as posters (6) or oral presentations (21).

A mixture of 70 researchers, members of civil society, policy makers, health care workers and students composed the audience.

The aim of the conference was to discuss both the long-term, complex consequences of the pandemic and the lessons we can learn for the future to raise awareness about preparedness for a future pandemic or crisis.

Dr. Sylvie Briand, Director of the Epidemic and Pandemic Preparedness and Prevention department (EPP) at the World Health Organization (WHO) and Dr. Erica Charters, Professor of the Global History of Medicine, University of Oxford were our two key-note speakers. In addition, the conference hosted several parallel sessions and panel debates.
The conference in numbers: 70 participants, 27 abstracts, 14 research institutions, 3 parallel sessions.
Once a month, master’s students and PhD candidates have the opportunity to present their ongoing research projects and receive feedback from one another and senior researchers affiliated with the Pandemic Centre at the Research Catalyst.

The Catalyst was going strong in 2023, and everything indicates that it will continue to do so in the new year.

During 2023, we had a total of 9 meetings, with topics ranging from vaccine hesitancy and attitudes towards government surveillance during the pandemic, to how a crisis such as COVID-19 can effect people’s dietary choices. We also had presentations about general topics that are useful for any academic, such as best practices for conducting qualitative research, and how to improve PowerPoint presentations!

Our presenters have included master’s students associated with the Pandemic Centre, PhD candidates from University of Oslo and academic staff from Western Norway University of Applied Sciences (HVL) and Arizona State University.

The Research Catalyst takes place once a month at Alrek Helseklyngen. All students from UiB are welcome to join to present their projects and receive feedback from their peers and the Pandemic Centre’s researchers.
Kim Haugland, PhD Candidate, The Pandemic Centre

At the Research Catalyst, I gained a wealth of knowledge about tools essential for effective research dissemination. The sessions equipped me with valuable skills, such as crafting captivating PowerPoint presentations and effectively communicating key points to engage my audience. The constructive feedback I received on my research project has proven invaluable in refining and enhancing its quality. As I prepare to defend my PhD project, I can clearly recognize the significant benefits derived from my participation in the Catalyst, which has played a pivotal role in my academic journey.

Yeneabeba Sima, PhD Candidate

The Pandemic Centre Research Catalyst has given me insight into different sides of research on pandemics that I would not have gotten otherwise, and it has given me invaluable experience when it comes to how to present mathematical models to non-mathematicians. Pandemics are a “wicked problem” that profoundly effect society in a multitude of ways. It has been an eye-opening experience to learn about them, and to reflect on the different ways that mathematical models can contribute.
INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATION

In 2023, The Pandemic Centre collaborated with several academic institutions outside of Norway.

Pandemic and Disaster Preparedness Center (PDPC)/The Netherlands

In January, the Pandemic Centre was visited by Linda Jansen (Project Manager) and Jeanette de Boer (Head of Education PDPC Academy) from the Pandemic and Disaster Preparedness Center in the Netherlands.

The PDPC is a joint collaboration of Erasmus MC, Delft University of Technology, Erasmus University Rotterdam and Gemeente Rotterdam. Its mission is to prepare society for future pandemics and disasters, reduce vulnerabilities and risks and build resilience through effective disaster prevention, preparedness and recovery measures.

During the week, the representatives of PDPC attended parts of the Pandemic Centre’s interdisciplinary PhD course and discussed future collaborations and partnerships with the Centre.

From left to right: Linda Jansen, Andrea Magugliani, Jeanette de Boer and Esperanza Diaz
PERISCOPE/Belgium

In the first week of March, a group of representatives from the Pandemic Centre visited UiB’s offices in Brussels. During the visit, the Pandemic Centre met Prof. Enea Parimbelli (University of Pavia), Laure Guillevac (FEAM) from the Pan-European Response to the Impacts of COVID-19 and future Pandemics and Epidemics (PERISCOPE) project and Siri Hauge, Policy officer in DG HERA - Health Emergency Preparedness and Response Authority, European Commission.

PERISCOPE is a Horizon2020-financed project investigating the broad socio-economic and behavioural impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, with the goal of making Europe more resilient and prepared for future large-scale risks.

Dhulikhel University Hospital/Nepal

In late March, the Pandemic Centre joined a Norwegian academic delegation to Nepal to discuss ways of furthering academic collaboration between Norway and Nepal. Esperanza Diaz presented the Pandemic Centre and its vision for an interdisciplinary approach to pandemics and disaster preparedness on several occasions.

During the visit, Esperanza Diaz, on behalf of the Pandemic Centre, signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Centre for Pandemic Preparedness and Response at Dhulikhel Hospital. The Centre took part in the “Women’s Careers and Empowerment in Global Health” conference, visited the Institute of Medicine at Katmandu University and organized several events and workshops.

INTER SOS/Greece

As part of our collaboration for capacity building in preparedness, the Pandemic Centre was in Athens for two days in December. On the first day, Esperanza Díaz and Prabhjot Kour participated in a round table discussion entitled “Strengthening the capacity and ensuring the protection of vulnerable migrants, asylum seekers and refugees”, organized by INTERSOS Hellas in partnership with the Pandemic Centre at UiB through a project Funded by ΣΟΛ Crowe, Human Rights 360.

Representatives from civil society organizations (e.g. NGOs), international organizations, academia, healthcare and funding agencies attended this discussion on lessons learned in Greece and Norway from the pandemic to enhance support for asylum seekers and refugees during health crises.
It’s rewarding to meet students from different countries and academic disciplines. They ask good questions. The legal challenge of how we can manage a dangerous pandemic without forsaking the rule of law and human rights was also shared.

It’s important to have arenas where we can meet to discuss these questions across backgrounds and disciplines.

It’s always enjoyable to teach this PhD course and meet students with different backgrounds and from various academic disciplines.

It’s challenging to convey central legal principles in a understandable way within a short time frame, but as a researcher and educator, it’s also an interesting and important challenge.
It was an inspiring and informative educational week that I spent in the Pandemic Centre in Bergen. I gained a more holistic view on the pandemic itself, as well as the approaches that human society has adopted, or should consider adopting for future challenges like Disease X.

The course was very interactive, which meant that not only did we receive scientific perspectives from the lecturers, but also we felt empowered to express our ideas based on individual experiences, together creating a broader spectrum of interdisciplinary and cross-contextual practice.

As a junior researcher, the interdisciplinary approach of the Pandemic Centre has sown a seed in my future research journey, reminding me to incorporate new perspectives, seek out new collaborations, and strive for collective achievements.

Ping Ping Song,
PhD candidate at Erasmus MC
Public Health Department
PUBLICATIONS

Scientific Articles


Reports


Newspaper Chronicles


