

Mains Master

The countdown to a pandemic treaty

Context

- The COVID-19 pandemic exposed failures in global health coordination, characterized by inequity and a lack of preparedness.
- In response, the World Health Organization (WHO) is leading the effort to draft a landmark Pandemic Agreement.

Background

- Negotiations are tense, with a final draft due for the World Health Assembly in May 2024.
- This is the most significant effort to restructure global health since the WHO's founding in 1948.
- The risk of the talks collapsing is high, potentially leaving the world vulnerable to future pandemics.

Proposed Features of the Treaty

- Aims to strengthen pandemic prevention, preparedness, and response with a focus on equity.
- Includes pathogen surveillance, healthcare capacity building, supply chain improvements, technology transfer, and potential intellectual property (IP) waivers.
- Seeks to improve antimicrobial resistance management, health systems, and universal health coverage.
- A Conference of Parties (COP) is proposed for oversight and implementation.

Benefits

- Could prevent the repetition of the failures seen during COVID-19.
- Emphasis on equity could ensure fairer distribution of vaccines, medications, and resources, especially to developing nations.
- Enhanced surveillance may lead to faster detection and response to outbreaks.

Opposition & Concerns

- Developing countries want stronger guarantees on equitable access to benefits derived from shared pathogen data.
- Developed countries often oppose tech transfer and IP waivers, citing potential impacts on the pharmaceutical industry.
- Lack of robust enforcement mechanisms is a major worry. Past health regulations have been ignored when inconvenient for powerful nations.

Way Forward

- Negotiations are ongoing, seeking compromise by late May 2024.
- A watered-down agreement is possible if consensus cannot be reached.
- Failure to create a binding agreement would be a major setback, undermining trust and leaving the world less prepared for future pandemics.

Tech giants facing EU scrutiny

Context

- Tech giants like Apple, Meta, Google, and Amazon face increased scrutiny from the European Union (EU) due to concerns about anti-competitive practices.
- The EU enacted the Digital Markets Act (DMA) to regulate these "gatekeeper" companies and ensure fairness in the digital market.

Background

- In September 2023, the EU designated Alphabet, Amazon, Apple, ByteDance, and Microsoft as 'gatekeepers' under the DMA.
- These companies were required to comply with the DMA's obligations by March 2024.
- The European Commission reviewed compliance reports and stakeholder feedback before launching investigations into potential violations.

The Issue

- The European Commission has opened non-compliance investigations against Apple, Meta, and Alphabet (Google's parent company) regarding DMA obligations.
- Allegations include:**
 - Steering:** Forcing users towards in-house services over competitors.
 - Self-Preferencing:** Giving unfair ranking advantages to a company's own products on its platforms.
 - Forced Consent:** Requiring personalized advertising consent to access services.

What is the DMA?

- The Digital Markets Act (DMA) is a landmark piece of EU legislation aimed at:
 - Regulating tech giants designated as "gatekeepers."
 - Promoting fair competition in the digital market.
 - Preventing "bottlenecks" that restrict innovation and consumer choice.

Impact of Monopolistic Tendencies

- Anti-competitive practices by tech giants can lead to:
 - Reduced consumer choice
 - Inflated prices
 - Stifled innovation
 - Limited competition for smaller businesses

Course Correction

- The European Commission's investigations signal a serious effort to enforce the DMA and address potential market distortions.
- Non-compliant companies could face:
 - Significant fines
 - Forced divestitures (selling off parts of their businesses)
 - Restrictions on future acquisitions

Way Forward

- The outcome of these investigations will have considerable implications for the future of the digital economy in the EU.
- The success of the DMA in ensuring fairer competition and protecting consumer rights will be closely watched globally.

Measuring internet freedom in India in the last 10 years

Context

- India has an alarming track record as the world leader in internet shutdowns. This trend disrupts daily lives and raises serious concerns about internet freedom in the country.

Background

- Over the past decade, India has imposed hundreds of internet shutdowns, with approximately 60% of all recorded blackouts worldwide happening in India.
- These shutdowns often occur during protests or in response to perceived security threats.
- The legal basis for these actions is an outdated British-era law (the Indian Telegraph Act) that has vague definitions.

Why Access to the Internet is Important

- The internet is essential for modern life, enabling:
 - Communication and connection with others

- Education and access to information
- Business operations and economic activity
- Expression of ideas and participation in public discourse
- **The Supreme Court of India has declared internet access a fundamental right.**

Why the Government Shuts Down the Internet

- The government frequently cites reasons such as:
 - National security concerns
 - Threats to public order/safety
 - Preventing the spread of misinformation

Issues Associated with Government Action

- Shutdowns have a devastating impact on people's lives, hindering essential activities.
- The lack of clear legal definitions for "emergency" and "public safety" create a potential for abuse of power.
- Transparency is lacking, as shutdown orders are often not made public.
- India's actions contradict its own Supreme Court ruling that internet access is a fundamental right.
- Frequent shutdowns damage India's reputation globally as a country that restricts internet freedom.

Supreme Court Observations

- The Supreme Court (Anuradha Bhasin v. Union of India) has ruled:
 - Internet shutdowns violate fundamental rights to freedom of expression.
 - Indefinite shutdowns are unconstitutional.
 - Governments must make shutdown orders public.

Way Forward

- India urgently needs to:
 - Update its laws to provide clear guidelines and definitions on when shutdowns are justified.
 - Increase transparency in decision-making and public reporting of shutdown orders.
 - Respect the Supreme Court ruling and uphold internet access as a fundamental right.
 - Explore alternative, less restrictive means for addressing security or public order concerns.

Jobs outlook bleak

Context

- India's much-discussed demographic dividend (young, plentiful workforce) is in danger of going to waste, creating a bleak jobs picture.

Background

- A new report ("The India Employment Report 2024") highlights an urgent need for policy changes to address severe youth unemployment and a mismatch between education and job requirements.

Key Findings of the Report

- 7-8 million young people enter India's labor force yearly; 83% of the unemployed are youth.
- Unemployed, educated youth have nearly doubled since 2000.
- Even graduates have a very high unemployment rate (29.1%).
- Real wages have stagnated or declined.

Grim Situation in India

- India's window to benefit from its young population is closing.
- Gender disparity in workforce participation remains severe.
- 90% of workers are in informal jobs, lacking security and benefits.

Demographic Dividend to Demographic Disaster

- High unemployment and underemployment among educated youth threaten to turn India's potential demographic advantage into a disaster.

Course Correction

- Politicians and policymakers must prioritize:
 - Job creation with an emphasis on quality employment
 - Revamping education and training to align with the needs of a tech-driven economy

Conclusion

- India urgently needs focused policy interventions to create sufficient, well-paying jobs that match the skills of its young workforce. Otherwise, the demographic dividend will become a liability, with dire socioeconomic consequences.

Prelims Booster

China sends glacier water from Tibet to climate-hit Maldives

🌏 China sends over a million bottles of water from melting Tibetan glaciers to the Maldives, a low-lying archipelago facing the brunt of rising sea levels due to the climate crisis.

💧 The Maldives, dependent on desalination plants due to saltwater intrusion, receives this gift as a response to water shortages, with glaciers in the Himalayas melting rapidly due to climate change.

🇨🇳 The donation, announced by Yan Jinhai, Chairman of Tibet's Xizang Autonomous Region, aims to assist islands facing water scarcity, amidst concerns of the Maldives becoming uninhabitable by the end of the century due to sea-level rise.

🌊 The Maldives, strategically located in the Indian Ocean, grapples with water scarcity issues, relying on desalination plants for drinking water, with recent incidents like a fire at a purification plant causing disruptions.

🤝 The aid from China comes amid geopolitical shifts in the region, with the Maldives balancing ties between India and China, highlighting the global impact of climate change on vulnerable nations like the Maldives.

Danakil Depression of the Afar region in Ethiopia.



Extreme Geography: A man walks through a salt canyon near Dallol in the Danakil Depression of the Afar region in Ethiopia, in the heart of the world's hottest place, the Danakil Depression is one of the hottest places on earth, with temperatures topping 50 degrees Celsius, etc.

Eradication of TB remains a distant goal as systemic challenges persist

🌐 TB Crisis in India: Despite commitments to eliminate TB by 2025, systemic challenges persist, hindering progress in combating the disease, including issues related to diagnosis, treatment access, nutrition, stigma, and economic support.

🌐 Biosocial Solutions: TB is a biosocial problem linked to inequities, requiring holistic solutions that address social determinants of health, such as undernutrition and poverty, which contribute significantly to TB incidence and outcomes.

💊 Biomedical Interventions: Current strategies include BCG vaccination, tuberculosis preventive treatment, and rifamycin-based regimens to reduce new infections and improve treatment outcomes, emphasizing the need for comprehensive care.

👶 Child TB Burden: India faces a significant burden of TB in children, highlighting the importance of tailored interventions and comprehensive care for pediatric patients within the national TB elimination program.

🏠 Innovative Care Models: Initiatives like the TN-KET model in Tamil Nadu showcase the potential of differentiated care approaches, triaging, and therapeutic nutrition to improve TB outcomes, especially in resource-limited settings.

🔍 Future Directions: Addressing TB challenges requires a multi-faceted approach, integrating biomedical interventions with social determinants of health, nutrition support, and innovative care models to enhance TB care delivery and outcomes in India.

