

WHO Director-General's opening remarks at the World Health Summit - 25 October 2020



25 October 2020

Your Excellency Frank-Walter Steinmeier, Federal President of Germany;

Your Excellency Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission;

Your Excellency Antonio Guterres, Secretary-General of the United Nations.

Professor Detlev Ganten,

Excellencies, dear colleagues and friends,

It is truly an honour to address you today.

As a member of the World Health Summit's founding committee, and now as one of its patrons, I am so pleased to see how it has evolved into a forum where a truly diverse group of global health leaders can come together to tackle the tough questions.

I am sad I cannot be in Berlin this year in person, but I am happy we can convene virtually.

We are indeed facing tough questions today.

When I had the honour of addressing the World Health Summit a year ago, I spoke about the deficit in political will to act on global health and preparedness.

Understandably, perhaps, both seemed like abstract concepts at the time, involving far away events that happened to far away people.

Well my friends, global health is no longer an abstraction.

From Berlin to Bogota, Minneapolis to Mumbai, Seoul to St Petersburg, we are facing the same threat, confronting the same difficult new reality.

Of course, this pandemic is playing out differently in every country and in every community.

But there are some constants: health systems matter, preparedness matters, and doctors, nurses, and health workers must have the training and equipment they need.

These have been fundamental to how countries and communities are weathering this pandemic.

The lesson is clear: A strong health system is a resilient health system.

Health systems and preparedness are not only an investment in the future, they are the foundation of our response today.

Public health is more than medicine and science, and it is bigger than any individual.

Ultimately, it is a matter of leadership, and a question of political choice.

COVID-19 is shining a light on the decisions we and our policy-makers have made not only today, but also in the past.

Many of the world's wealthiest countries, with some of the most advanced health systems, have been upended by this virus.

This virus thrives in the inequalities in our societies and the gaps in our health systems.

The pandemic has highlighted the neglect of basic health system functions underpinning emergency preparedness, to disastrous consequence.

COVID-19 has put the spotlight on critical gaps in areas such as surveillance, diagnostics, essential medicines, protective equipment, supply chains, infection prevention and control, water, sanitation and hygiene, and the health workforce.

The absence of any one of these leaves communities vulnerable and undermines the timely response necessary to contain the pandemic, or any health crisis.

But the pandemic has also given us cause for hope.

Because we have seen again and again that when countries and communities take the right actions, it is never too late to bring the outbreak under control.

We know that fundamental public health measures work: find, test, isolate, and care for every case, and trace and quarantine every contact.

We know that we can slow the spread of the virus through physical distancing, masks, handwashing, and meeting family and friends outside.

We have to do it all.

And across the globe we continue to see a resurgence of cases when countries reopen their societies and economies too quickly.

This is a dangerous moment for many countries in the northern hemisphere as cases spike, but again and again, we have seen that taking the right actions quickly means the outbreak can be managed.

In the face of this unprecedented threat, leaders must strike a delicate balance between protecting their people and maintaining essential health services, while minimizing social and economic damage, and respecting human rights.

It is not enough to be reactive. We must plan and take action for this pandemic over the long-haul.

We have to move from ad-hoc solutions to long-term planning, to protect lives and livelihoods.

And the health effects of the pandemic go far beyond the suffering caused by the virus itself.

Vaccination campaigns for tuberculosis, pneumonia and diarrhoea, polio, measles, and many others have been disrupted, putting hundreds of millions of people at risk.

We must preserve and restart our prevention and treatment campaigns and other essential health services with the utmost urgency, while also assuring safe conditions for frontline workers and patients alike.

We still have a long haul ahead of us. We cannot slow down and we cannot waver.

It is more important than ever that we focus on the elderly and other vulnerable populations who already struggle to access health services, including migrants and other marginalized groups.

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We have a huge challenge ahead of us. But this is not the first challenge we have faced and this will not be the last.

We are learning the lessons of this pandemic every day. It is up to us to act on them.

Last year, and since then, I have spoken many times about the importance of national unity and international cooperation, of multilateralism and solidarity.

Again, the pandemic has made these concepts concrete. They are literally matters of life and death.

It is natural that countries want to protect their own citizens first.

But if and when we have an effective vaccine, we must also use it effectively.

And the best way to do that is to vaccinate some people in all countries, rather than all people in some countries.

Let me be clear: vaccine nationalism will prolong the pandemic, not shorten it.

The only way to recover faster, be it lives or livelihoods, is to recover together.

This is why President von der Leyen and President Emmanuel Macron joined with WHO to launch the Access to COVID-19 Tools Accelerator, to scale up the development and delivery of safe and effective vaccines, treatments and diagnostics to the world's most at-risk people in all countries.

I also want to especially mention President Macron and Chancellor Angela Merkel, who have increased their commitment to support WHO's coordinating role in the global public health architecture.

And I would like to give a special thanks to my close friend, His Excellency Jens Spahn, the Minister of Health of the Federal Republic of Germany, who has been a steadfast supporter of WHO's work and a champion for multilateral action and support for health.

Jens, I wish you a quick recovery.

Finally, I also have the pleasure of announcing that together with the Global Governance Project, we are releasing a new publication entitled "Health: A Political Choice: Act Now, Together."

It includes national cases studies on the response to COVID-19, insights from leaders, and addresses the economic, social and ecological determinants underlying the pandemic.

Excellencies, friends, and colleagues, how we emerge from this pandemic, and whether we are ready to take on the challenges of the future, depends on our actions today.

Working together in solidarity, we can save lives, stabilize health systems, and drive a global recovery.

And even as we respond to the current crisis, we have to be planning ahead for the long-term.

We must learn the lessons of today so that we are prepared for the threats of tomorrow.

I thank you.



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