



WHO Director-General's opening remarks at the media briefing on COVID-19 – 23 April 2021

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- A year ago, WHO and the many partners who have joined us today came together to launch a unique initiative: the Access to COVID-19 Tools Accelerator.
- The ACT Accelerator was conceived with two aims: the rapid development of vaccines, diagnostics and therapeutics; and equitable access to those tools.
- The first objective has been achieved. But we have a long way to go on the second objective. Around the world, people are dying because they're not vaccinated, they're not tested, and they're not treated. The ACT Accelerator needs 19 billion US dollars this year.

Good morning, good afternoon and good evening.

When COVID-19 emerged almost 16 months ago, we knew that we already had effective tools to prevent infections and save lives, in the form of fundamental public health measures.

Those measures continue to be the backbone of the response in all countries.

But we also knew that we would need new tools: diagnostics to test for this new virus, therapeutics to treat it, and vaccines to prevent it.

At the same time, we knew that we live in an inequitable world; a world in which children die from diseases that can be easily prevented with vaccines; and in which people die because their sickness goes undiagnosed and untreated.

We knew that unless we took unprecedented action, the world's have-nots would be left behind again.

So a year ago, WHO and the many partners who have joined us today came together to launch a unique initiative: the Access to COVID-19 Tools Accelerator.

The ACT Accelerator was conceived with two aims: the rapid development of vaccines, diagnostics and therapeutics; and equitable access to those tools.

The first objective has been achieved. We now have several safe and effective vaccines to prevent COVID-19; we have rapid diagnostics to test for it; and we have oxygen and dexamethasone to treat it.

But we have a long way to go on the second objective.

Around the world, people are dying because they're not vaccinated, they're not tested, and they're not treated.

We're deeply concerned about the increasing number of cases and deaths in India right now.

We know that the situation is complex, and requires different responses in different parts of the country, and I welcome the steps the government has taken to reduce social mixing and boost vaccine production.

I offer my deep condolences to everyone in India who has lost someone they love. And I offer my deep commitment that WHO and our partners in the ACT Accelerator stand with the government and people of India and will do everything we can to save as many lives as we can.

WHO has redeployed 2600 staff from our other programmes on polio, TB, neglected tropical diseases and immunization programmes to support states to respond.

The situation in India is a devastating reminder of what this virus can do and why we must marshal every tool against it in a comprehensive and integrated approach: public health measures, vaccines, diagnostics and therapeutics.

This is a scenario that is playing out around the world, and will continue to play out unless we ensure equitable access to the tools needed to save lives.

The solution is straightforward: we need countries and companies that control the resources that could save lives to share.

That means sharing financial resources, to fully fund the ACT Accelerator;

It means sharing vaccine doses, to protect the most at-risk, not just the most-rich;

It means all countries being transparent about their bilateral dose donations, so we know who has what;

And it means sharing technology, know-how and intellectual property, to urgently and massively scale up production.

The ACT Accelerator needs 19 billion US dollars this year.

That's a drop in the ocean compared with the trillions of dollars governments are spending on supporting their economies, and the massive revenues that most vaccine makers are generating.

It's not good enough to say that inequity is just the way the world is. It's not okay that people just like you and me die when we have the tools that could save them.

We cannot accept the same old story.

This is the time for all of us to write a new story; a better story that sees nations not as rivals or competitors, but as members of one human family with a common future. Call me an idealist; I will wear that badge with pride.

In many ways, that's what the ACT Accelerator is – one family of governments, agencies, civil society, the private sector, philanthropies and others coming together to find shared solutions to our shared challenge.

None of us can do this alone.

Creating the ACT Accelerator was an achievement in itself. But leading it and running it has been an enormous and often unseen task.

In September last year, we established a Facilitation Council, led by South Africa and Norway, to provide high-level political leadership and advice to facilitate the ACT Accelerator's work.

It's now my great honour to welcome His Excellency Cyril Ramaphosa, the President of South Africa.

Your Excellency, thank you for your outstanding leadership and support for the ACT Accelerator. You have the floor.

[PRESIDENT RAMAPHOSA ADDRESSED THE MEDIA]

Thank you, Your Excellency, and my deep appreciation once again for your exemplary leadership, domestically, regionally and globally.

It's now my pleasure to welcome His Excellency Dag Inge Ulstein, the Minister of International Development of Norway. Minister, thank you for your leadership as co-chair of the ACT Accelerator Facilitation Council, and for joining us today. You have the floor.

[MINISTER ULSTEIN ADDRESSED THE MEDIA]

Thank you so much, Minister, I have enormously valued your leadership and friendship over the past year.

Since the earliest discussions about the ACT Accelerator, and throughout the past year, the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, has been a steadfast partner.

I thank President von der Leyen for her leadership and partnership, and it's my honour to welcome her to make a statement.

[PRESIDENT VON DER LEYEN'S VIDEO MESSAGE WAS PLAYED]

One of the first and most decisive calls we had early last year as the ACT Accelerator was starting to take shape was with President Emmanuel Macron of France. And President Macron has continued to take an active interest and to play an active role in the ACT Accelerator.

To mark this first anniversary, we have asked President Macron to reflect on the year that has passed and to look forward to the opportunities and challenges that lie ahead.

[PRESIDENT MACRON'S VIDEO MESSAGE WAS PLAYED]

Thank you so much, Your Excellency President Macron, and thank you France for your generous donation to COVAX. I hope other countries will soon follow your example.

The strength of the ACT Accelerator is that it has been supported strongly by governments all over the world. Now it's my honour to introduce three leaders who have been unwavering in their support: Prime Minister Mario Draghi of Italy; President Paul Kagame of Rwanda; and Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez of Spain.

[VIDEO MESSAGES FROM PRIME-MINISTER DRAGHI, PRESIDENT KAGAME AND PRESIDENT SANCHEZ WERE PLAYED]

Of course, WHO is proud to have played a leading role in the ACT Accelerator, but we have only done so as part of the United Nations, and with its support. It's now my honour to introduce Amina Mohammed, the Deputy-Secretary General of the United Nations.

[DEPUTY SECRETARY-GENERAL AMINA MOHAMMED'S VIDEO WAS PLAYED]

As I said earlier, the strength of the ACT Accelerator is its wide support from governments all over the world. I'm now pleased to introduce video messages that have been sent by Gayle Smith, the Global COVID-19 Coordinator from the United States of America; Karina Gould, the Minister of International Development of Canada; and Mikhail Murashko, the Minister of Health of the Russian Federation.

[VIDEO MESSAGES FROM MS SMITH, MINISTER GOULD AND MINISTER MURASHKO WERE PLAYED]

Civil society organizations play a vital role in every area of health – holding leaders to account, providing technical expertise, delivering services and giving voice to their communities.

The ACT Accelerator is no exception, and it's now my honour to introduce Peter Ngo'la Owiti from Kenya, who is a civil society representative on the ACT Accelerator Facilitation Council.

[MR NGO'LA OWITI'S VIDEO MESSAGE WAS PLAYED]

Finally, vaccines, diagnostics and therapeutics would not exist at all without the private sector companies who develop and produce them.

It's now my pleasure to welcome Thomas Cueni, the Director-General of the International Federation of Pharmaceutical Manufacturers Associations, to be followed by John Denton, the Secretary General of the International Chamber of Commerce.

[MR CUENI'S AND MR DENTON'S VIDEO MESSAGES WERE PLAYED]

Thank you so much to all our speakers today.

As I said in my opening remarks, the ACT Accelerator is a unique partnership that has involved the participation of 9 global health organizations, working together to build something that is truly much more than the sum of its parts.

Today I'm delighted to welcome the leaders of each of our partners:

Seth Berkley from Gavi, Philippe Duneton from UNITAID; Chris Elias from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation; Henrietta Fore from UNICEF; Emma Hannay from FIND; Richard Hatchett from CEPI; Muhammed Pate from the World Bank; Peter Sands from the Global Fund; and Carl Bildt, our Special Envoy for the ACT Accelerator, the co-chair of the group, and the former Prime Minister of Sweden.

Thank you to all of you for your leadership and partnership, and I look forward to our continued collaboration in the months ahead as we work together to stop infections, save lives and end the pandemic.

Christian, back to you.

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