



WHO Director-General's opening remarks at the Member State Information Session - 29 April 2021

29 April 2021

Honourable Ministers, Excellencies, dear colleagues and friends,

Good morning, good afternoon and good evening to all Member States, and thank you for joining us once again.

Around the world, cases of COVID-19 have increased for the ninth straight week, and deaths have increased for the sixth straight week.

While we have seen small declines in several regions, globally, there were almost as many cases last week as in the first five months of the pandemic.

Many countries are struggling with intense transmission, which illustrates the vital importance of a comprehensive and consistent application of public health measures alongside equitable vaccination.

The current situation globally illustrates the importance of fully funding WHO's 2021 Strategic Preparedness and Response Plan.

Last week I stressed the importance of flexible donations, which allow us to deploy resources to where they are needed most urgently.

To reiterate, as of today, WHO has only received 30% of the \$1.9 billion we asked for under the SPRP, with only 10% of the funds received that WHO needs to deliver on our work on the ACT Accelerator under the SPRP. I urge Member States to support this life-saving work.

One part of that work is in the Health Systems Connector, which was established as a cross-cutting mechanism within the ACT Accelerator to address operational needs related to rapid and large-scale deployment of diagnostics, treatments including oxygen, vaccines and personal protective equipment.

The Health Systems Connector is led by WHO, the Global Fund and the World Bank, and today you will hear more about it from Global Fund Executive Director Peter Sands and WHO Deputy Director-General Zsuzsanna Jakab.

Of course, WHO is not acting alone. Around the world, WHO is working closely with our partners in the United Nations system to deliver as one UN.

Today you will be hearing from Peter Graaff, the coordinator of the UN Crisis Management Team on the progress of WHO's COVID-19 Response Coordination with UN Partners.

We are very grateful to Robert Piper, Assistant Secretary-General for Development Coordination and Rein Paulsen, Director of Coordination Division at the UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, for joining this session.

===

The COVID-19 pandemic is a vivid demonstration of the immense power and value of vaccines.

This is World Immunization Week. Even as COVID-19 vaccines are helping us to bring COVID-19 under control in some regions, the pandemic continues to severely disrupt immunization services around the world.

New WHO data show that as a result of COVID-19, 60 immunization campaigns are currently suspended in 50 countries.

That means about 228 million children are vulnerable to deadly, vaccine-preventable diseases such as measles, yellow fever and polio.

Measles campaigns are the most affected, accounting for 23 of the postponed campaigns. Many measles campaigns have now been delayed for more than a year.

In addition to targeted campaigns to prevent or respond to outbreaks, routine childhood immunization services were disrupted in more than a third of countries in the first quarter of 2021.

Gaps in vaccination coverage are already having grave real-world consequences.

Serious measles outbreaks have occurred in several countries, including the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Pakistan and Yemen.

And the risk of measles outbreaks is mounting elsewhere, as more and more children miss out on the vaccines they so urgently need.

WHO, UNICEF, Gavi, and other partners are working with countries to ensure that immunization services are restored quickly and safely.

But we must not forget that even before the COVID-19 pandemic, nearly 20 million children missed out on lifesaving vaccines each year.

We must not only get immunization back on track, but do better than before.

This week, WHO, UNICEF, Gavi and other partners launched the Immunization Agenda 2030, an ambitious global strategy to maximize the lifesaving impact of vaccines.

If fully implemented, the Immunization Agenda 2030 could avert over 50 million deaths over the next decade – 75 percent of them in low- and lower-middle income countries.

First, we call on world leaders and the global health and development community to make bold new commitments to advance this strategy.

Second, we call on all countries to develop and implement national plans that align with the Immunization Agenda 2030, and increase investments to make immunization accessible to all.

Third, we call on donors and governments to increase investments in vaccine research, development, and delivery, focused on the needs of underserved populations

And fourth, we call on the vaccine industry and scientists to continue to accelerate research and development, ensure a continuous supply of affordable vaccines to meet global needs, and apply lessons from COVID-19 to other diseases.

As you know, science and research have always been the foundation of progress in public health, and have always been central to WHO's mission and mandate, as an evidence-based organization.

This week saw the first meeting of the WHO Science Council, the latest step in our efforts to strengthen the standard of WHO's scientific work.

Two years ago, as part of the WHO Transformation, we established a new science division, and appointed WHO's first Chief Scientist, Dr Soumya Swaminathan.

The Science Council brings together leading scientists from around the world to ensure WHO remains abreast of the latest scientific developments, and to ensure the excellence, relevance and efficacy of WHO's core technical functions.

The Council has determined that the use of genomic technologies for the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of diseases will be its first area of work.

You'll be hearing more on that in meetings to come.

As always, we are grateful for your engagement and look forward to your questions and comments.

I thank you.

Subscribe to the WHO newsletter →