

World Health Summit Global Health Dialogue, February 29, 2024:

## **"Bridging the Trust Deficit: Trust in Governments, Institutions and International Cooperation"**

Statement from John-Arne Røttingen, CEO, Wellcome Trust

### **Building and brokering trust – the role of science**

Science is one of our most powerful tools to change the world, but it needs society's trust.

Health, economy, international relations, all benefit from sustained commitment to science. Policy and practice are strongest when informed by evidence.

Without science we won't tackle the urgent international health challenges facing everyone - from the climate crisis, infectious disease and rising mental health illness.

Without research to inform policy and practice, we risk relying on politics and unfounded opinions.

But while science can bring breathtaking advances - to protect and improve physical and mental health, to drive innovation in renewable energies, sustainable food systems, or take us to incredible new frontiers in artificial intelligence - it also has an ongoing responsibility to strengthen and negotiate the trust needed for advances and solutions to fulfil their potential for impact.

At [Wellcome](#), which I joined as CEO at the start of this year, we support the role science has to play in addressing the world's urgent health challenges. That gives us particular interest in trust in science.

### **Recent evidence of trust in scientists is encouraging**

[The Edelman Trust Barometer 2024](#) shows that scientists are more trusted to 'tell the truth about new innovations and technologies' than either government leaders or NGO representatives.

The global survey of over 70,000 participants found a high level of trust in scientists in countries around the world. In fact, more than half of respondents thought researchers should be more involved in policymaking and should work closely with politicians to integrate scientific results into policymaking.

It poses an interesting question. To what extent would doing this more help rebuild trust in health policymaking and health multilateralism?

Of course, we have to do this in the right way – using a range of disciplines, including social and behavioural sciences.

Science is, we must always remember, only part of the puzzle – it doesn't have the answers on its own.

The same Edelman trust report, after all, shows that 53% of global citizens believe science has become politicised. This should also be a concern to us.

## **Where science happens, not just when or how, is critical**

Ensuring research is done in the places affected and by people who are part of the communities affected by health challenges is key in terms of building both trust and relevance.

One way Wellcome approaches this is by supporting locally driven research programmes guided by regional health priorities in Africa and Asia. Our Africa and Asia Programmes aim to support networks of multidisciplinary researchers across each region, who are best placed to react to issues such as escalating infectious disease threats in hospitals and communities, or implementing research-led change within health systems.

By enabling excellent science, tailored to meet the most pressing health challenges in these settings, we can help foster greater trust in science and health where we see the greatest vulnerabilities to issues such as climate change and escalating infectious disease.

## **Who benefits can build or break trust**

The Wellcome Global Monitor ([2018](#) and [2020](#)) found that trust in science is affected by whether people feel science “benefits people like me”. People in the global south (specified in the report as North Africa, Southern Africa and Central and South America) were much less likely to feel that science benefitted them than those in global north countries.

Navigating the challenges of ensuring equitable access and correcting market failures are as important as exploring the potential of science to change lives.

Covid-19 showed us how rapidly trust between governments can break down if scientific gains are not shared in a fair, timely or accessible way - if the communities most affected are not at the centre of international health dialogues and decision-making, or left behind by the international community when pressures on national health security come to the fore.

## **Rebuilding trust**

The international health and science communities share a responsibility to rebuild trust post-Covid by complementing country and regionally led priorities, and pulling together on common health challenges that will affect all our communities.

One recent successful example, is the way in which the global health community pulled together for the first ever Health Day at COP28 in December.

Another, the Future of Global Health Initiatives which has led to The Lusaka Agenda. Developed through 14 months of multi-stakeholder dialogue and deliberation, bringing together Global South and Global North actors, it provides a foundation for equitable health systems financing and country led health plans, budgets and implementation.

A third example, the Pandemic Agreement negotiations, illustrates both the power and the fragility of trust. Access and benefit sharing, capacity building and mobilizing resources for the Pandemic Fund is the precious promise it holds.

## **Healthier futures depend on trust**

Evidence generated through rigorous scientific research is fundamental to progress and for society to thrive.

Just as science needs long-term, sustainable support, trust in scientific advances and the role of science is not something we can afford to take for granted.

How science develops in the next decade and the impact it will have will be determined by whether trust is maintained.