

WELCOME MESSAGES
HIGH PATRONS OF THE WORLD HEALTH SUMMIT 2023



I am honoured to welcome you to the 2023 World Health Summit, alongside fellow patrons Chancellor Olaf Scholz and President Emmanuel Macron.

It was 75 years ago that the World Health Organization was founded, as countries were rebuilding after the collective trauma of World War II. It was during this founding moment that the authors of WHO's constitution affirmed both that health is a human right, and that the health of all people is fundamental to peace and security.

Since that time, the world has seen major improvements in health. Life expectancy globally, for both sexes, has increased from 46 to 73 years, with the biggest gains in the poorest countries. WHO led a successful campaign to eradicate smallpox and is part of a consortium that has driven polio to the brink. Forty-two countries have eliminated malaria, and the HIV and

TB epidemics have been pushed back. In the past 20 years alone, smoking has fallen by a third, maternal mortality has fallen by a third and child mortality has more than halved. In just the past five years, new vaccines for Ebola and malaria have been developed and licensed.

These accomplishments were the collective work of hardworking individuals, organizations, and governments from around the world, and WHO has been a proud partner, supporting countries as they implement policies and programs to drive change towards a healthier world.

Despite these advances, many challenges remain. Noncommunicable diseases now account for 70% of all deaths globally; obesity rates have skyrocketed; antimicrobial resistance threatens to unwind a century of medical progress; and air pollution and climate change are jeopardising the very habitability of the planet on which all life depends.

At the same time, we continue to face vast disparities in access to health services, between and within countries and communities. Since 2000, the number of people

with access to essential services has increased significantly, but the number of people who are impoverished every year by out-of-pocket health spending has almost doubled, to 1.1 billion.

The severe inequities and inequalities in global health were amplified by the three years of the COVID-19 pandemic. On top of the death and suffering it caused, COVID-19 severely disrupted health systems, roiled economies, and caused immense social upheaval, while also exposing and exacerbating political fault lines, within and between nations.

Moving forward, we must learn the lessons not only of these pandemic years, but of the whole 75 years of WHO's existence. In keeping with the areas of focus of this year's World Health Summit, I offer three priorities.

First, the pandemic was a vivid demonstration that an advanced medical care system is not the same thing as a strong public health system. Some countries with the most sophisticated medical care were overwhelmed by COVID-19. By contrast, some lower-income countries with fewer

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resources fared much better, thanks to investments in public health after outbreaks of SARS, MERS, H1N1 and others. They had the muscle memory, and they had the trust of their communities.

Second, the backbone of public health is robust primary health care. That is why WHO calls on all countries, at all income levels, to invest in public health, and especially in primary health care. Such investments will repay themselves many times over by preventing or delaying the need for more costly secondary and tertiary care, as well as working as an early warning system for health emergencies.

At a time when economies are stagnating, debt is rising and budgets are squeezed, governments are under pressure to

tighten the purse strings. But now is exactly the right moment to make strategic investments in health – investments in human capital – that will pay dividends for decades to come in more healthy, productive, secure, equitable and sustainable societies.

Which leads to the third lesson: the importance of cooperation and multi-stakeholder collaborations, such as those fostered at the World Health Summit. The lesson of the pandemic is clear: we can only face shared threats with a shared response, based on a shared commitment to solidarity and equity. That is what the pandemic accord that countries are now negotiating is all about: an agreement between nations to work in cooperation with each other – not in competition – to

prepare for and respond to epidemics and pandemics. The same is true for the Pandemic Fund, which WHO is co-administering with the World Bank.

There is a famous Ethiopian proverb that says when spiderwebs unite, they can tie up a lion. The challenges we face in global health can seem daunting. No single country or agency can address these challenges alone. Let's learn the lesson of the COVID pandemic: when we work together, we can overcome anything.



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