

Extemporaneous Speech on COVID-19

Rarely in modern times have we seen a demonstration of the value of universal health coverage as powerful as COVID-19.

The pandemic has underscored the full value of the human right to social protection, which is a vital safeguard from financial shocks not only for individuals, but for entire societies.

These are not costs – they are investments. And despite the resourcefulness, courage and tireless work of health-workers and other essential workers around the world, we have seen the massive harm that is done to everyone when these fundamental human rights are not upheld.

Human rights and public health go hand in hand.

Long before COVID-19, WHO, UNAIDS and others were strongly advising that all public health measures be implemented with the full engagement of the public – because respect for the public's right to speak up, and to meaningfully participate in decisions is essential to compliance, and to the success of health policies.

The only effective way to fight an epidemic is with the public's trust.

The only effective way to rebuild health systems, economies, businesses and societies is to ensure they serve the needs and rights of the people – because the people have participated in reforms.

So today, we need to mobilize broad and active coalitions to help reshape many systems that have demonstrated their weaknesses.

We need to ensure that health and social protection systems encompass both universal health coverage and the underlying determinants of health.

We need to create the conditions that will mean everyone who requires medical attention and services will receive them.

We need to re-orient public health policy towards models of universal health coverage that are grounded in human rights, with a whole-of-government approach that partners with an empowered, informed and engaged stakeholder base.

We need systems that protect people at times of crisis – including through income protection.

This means we need to ensure that everyone can fully, and meaningfully, participate in setting priorities – including when resources are allocated, and resourcing models are adopted.