

UNECE Regional Forum on Sustainable Development

Key-note address, at 10.30am on 17 March 2021

Dr Hans Kluge, WHO Regional Director for Europe

Your Excellencies, Madame Deputy Secretary General, distinguished participants, good morning, good afternoon, good evening.

Since January 2020, the WHO European Region has seen more than 41 million reported cases of COVID-19 and is steadily approaching 1 million registered deaths.

The pandemic has harshly exposed the inequalities that exist in our societies;

it has disproportionately affected the elderly, youth, women, migrants and refugees,

it has magnified health, social and economic vulnerabilities.

We have seen a grave impact on all the Sustainable Development Goals. As of today, we expect further setbacks and a delayed achievement of health-related targets. Allow me to explain why:

- A WHO survey covering June and July last year showed that three quarters of 34 countries in the ECE Region reported disruption to rehabilitation, diagnosis and treatment, family planning and routine immunization - endangering the achievement of many of the SDG3 targets.
- Gaps in immunization coverage are creating new risks of outbreaks and disease resurgence. Some countries temporarily suspended their entire childhood vaccination programmes early in the pandemic,
- Most countries have struggled to maintain a dual track of pandemic response and essential service delivery, including cardiovascular disease, rehabilitation and palliative services.
- A crisis of non-communicable diseases, including cancer, is looming. Early on in the pandemic, we found that 1 in 3 countries in the ECE Region had partially or completely disrupted cancer services. Screening has been disrupted, diagnosis has plummeted in many countries and often life-saving surgery has been canceled or postponed.
- When the pandemic hit, not a single country in this region had achieved gender equality. Not one. COVID-19 has since aggravated and shone a light on underlying structural gender inequalities.
- Unemployment and financial insecurity - is affecting access to health services, particularly in areas where populations are reliant on out-of-pocket payments for health care.
- The impact on mental health is staggering. Regardless of your place in society, no-one has been untouched by the fear, angst, stress and fatigue that this pandemic has asserted on each of us.

The fight with the SARS-CoV-2 virus has come at an enormous cost, with more than 2.6 million deaths and a gigantic financial losses to the global economy ranging from 10-30 trillion US dollars. We simply cannot afford to allow this to happen again.

Alongside the unprecedented emergency response measures of support to the 53 Member States in the WHO European Region, WHO has launched significant initiatives towards a 'sustainable and resilient recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and delivery on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development'.

In September 2020, the 53 Member States of the WHO European Region adopted the **European Programme of Work**, envisioning how the respective governments across the Region and the UN can support countries in meeting citizens' health expectations. The European Programme of Work is more relevant now than ever. Alongside the EPW flagship programmes of immunization, behavioural and cultural insights and digital health, the EPW represents *the* tool through which we will shine a light on **mental health**.

As Deputy Secretary General Amina Mohammed has expressed on a number of occasions throughout this pandemic, its impact on people's mental health has been profound. This year, under the auspices of Queen Mathilde of the Belgians, we will launch a coalition to transform attitudes about mental health, expedite mental health service reforms and accelerate progress towards universal health coverage for persons with mental health conditions. I welcome your support and participation.

Looking forward, I convened a **Pan-European Commission on Health and Sustainable Development** to rethink policy, far beyond a pre-pandemic definition of health. The Commission, Chaired by Professor Mario Monti, former Prime-Minister of Italy, delivered a call-to-action yesterday, calling for an intergovernmental panel on health threats, and a Global Health Board, similar to the G20 Financial Stability Board, established in the wake of the global financial crisis. Fixing the fractures that allowed COVID-19 to happen, the Commission urges us to collectively strive towards the goal of universal health coverage – a cornerstone of societal cohesion, economic development, women's participation and equitable access to healthcare.

Commitments to equity and solidarity are in question. Whilst a total of 46 countries in his Region have deployed COVID-19 vaccines, seven countries and territories have still not received a single dose. On Monday, our Governing body, the **Standing Committee of the Regional Committee**, called upon member states to adhere to the general principles of international solidarity and multilateral cooperation. Five countries in the European Region, Albania, Tajikistan, the Republic of Moldova, Uzbekistan, and Georgia, have received vaccines from the COVAX facility; a first step towards addressing the uneven access to vaccines between countries. I am personally invested in efforts to increase vaccine access to Member States still in need, through COVAX or other donation opportunities.

COVID-19 has taken advantage of inequity and division and made the SDGs even more urgent than before. As Member State decision makers, I urge you today to take heed this call, and to invest in an economy of wellbeing, with health at the centrepoint of society. It is in our hands to build back better with the tools at our disposal, the SDGs among them, in addition to the many lessons learnt in the past 14 months. Lessons that need to inspire further innovation, scientific breakthroughs, digitalization and last but not least - solidarity.

Thank you.