

## Report from the 73<sup>rd</sup> World Health Assembly – digital event, May 18-19



This year's World Health Assembly (WHA) has been conducted virtually, with sessions on 18th May and 19th May. The Assembly has then been adjourned (not closed) with the intention of convening an in-person meeting in the autumn, if possible. The items discussed during this first session of WHA73 were essential items for

ensuring the continuity of governance business as well as a resolution on COVID-19.

WHA73 opened with statements delivered by prime ministers of various countries around the world. Statements by invited speakers Xi Jinping (China), Emmanuel Macron (France), Angela Merkel (Germany) among others were focused on their in-country response to COVID-19, the **support** (also economical) **to WHO** and the socio-economic consequences of the pandemic. Everyone recognized the important role of health workers in the current health crisis and thanked them for their work.

The United Nations Secretary General Antonio Guterres highlighted that, despite the advances in society, "a microscopic virus has brought us to our knees". He added that COVID-19 must be a wake up call, and appeals to "humility, unity and solidarity".

Mia Amor Mottley, prime minister of Barbados, pointed out that, despite the current pandemic, the world should "not drop the ball on other health challenges especially chronic **non-communicable diseases** (NCDs), the silent killers".



Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO Director General, opening the 2020 World Health Assembly (WHA73)

The World Health Organization (WHO)'s Director General Dr. Tedros gave the [opening statement](#) with a comprehensive statement starting with a note that, in the Year of Nurses and Midwives, the pandemic has shown how important all health workers are. The world has confronted other pandemics before and, during COVID-19, we have seen the same pattern repeated in cities around the



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world. He highlighted that the pandemic has brought out the best and worst of us. In the opening statement, he mentioned NCDs and mental health. "We have been humbled by this very small microbe. The virus is teaching us humility." Regarding the measures taken by government in the so-called second phase of COVID-19 management, Dr Tedros pointed out that WHO wants "the fastest possible global recovery, that is why we urge caution". He also clarified that early serological tests show that "the majority of the world population remains susceptible to the virus. We have a long road to travel." He called for a comprehensive approach to dealing with COVID-19: "There is no simple bullet, simple solution, panacea, no "one size fits all". " Dr Tedros emphasized the importance of a whole-of-government and whole-of-society response, commitment and capacity to find and test every case, special attention to vulnerable groups like nursing homes, refugee camps, prison, detention centers. Dr Tedros listed the timely interventions by WHO during the current pandemic, highlighting that they sounded the alarm early and often, notified countries, issued guidance, declared global health emergency already when there were less than 100 cases and no deaths outside China. He pointed out that accountability mechanisms are already in place and are working. Dr Tedros welcomed "the impartial, independent and comprehensive evaluation as asked in the resolution" and replied that WHO will initiate an independent evaluation to review and make recommendation to improve pandemic response. "But the world must never be the same." He asked for a "safe and more resilient world" and that the so-called "triple billion targets" introduced by him at the beginning of his mandate (1 billion more people benefitting from universal health coverage, 1 billion more people better protected from health emergencies, 1 billion more people enjoying better health and well-being), and the Sustainable Development Goals should still be pursued. "More than ever, the pandemic illustrates that investing in health must be at the center of development. Health is not a luxury, it is a necessity. Health is not a cost, it's an investment." He concluded his opening statement with a call for a strong WHO.

Addresses by WHO Member States had several common themes:

- Need for cooperation and solidarity between states, experience sharing,
- Recognition of the medical community,
- Recognition of the role of WHO in the pandemic and its importance.

Some statements highlighted the importance of **equitable and fair distribution of vaccine**, treatments, diagnostics, noting that a vaccine against the virus causing COVID-19 should be considered as public good.

Denmark highlighted that the pandemic shows the catastrophic effects of NCDs, while Bahamas pointed out that the pandemic, together with recent natural catastrophes afflicting the country, can exacerbate inequalities and NCDs. An appeal not to forget to address **mental health** was done by Canada and by the Netherlands (Global Health Agenda group statement).

At the end of the statements by Member States, the **resolution on COVID-19** was adopted.



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Closing remarks by Dr Tedros Adhanom  
Ghebreyesus at the 2020 World Health Assembly

lives.” He affirmed that “COVID-19 has shaken the foundations of our world. COVID-19 reminds that we are one human race and we are stronger together. We share the same DNA. We share the same aspirations for a peaceful and harmonious world. We may have different culture and traditions, but we share the same planet.” In a powerful ending of his speech, he stated “Let hope be the antidote to fear. Let solidarity be the antidote to division. Let shared humanity be the antidote to shared threat. Together we will overcome this challenge.”

In its [closing remarks](#), Dr Tedros thanked those who offered solidarity to WHO as well as for the resolution calling for the independent evaluation, that will be initiated at the appropriate time as mentioned during his opening remarks. He strongly pointed out that WHO is committed to accountability, transparency, and improvement. WHO focus now is fighting the pandemic “with every tool at our disposal. Our focus is saving