

My hope for ending the COVID-19 pandemic in 2022

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With the curtain closing on 2021, we are faced by a sombre milestone, and a stark choice. This New Year's Eve marks the second anniversary of the COVID-19 pandemic, serving as a poignant reminder of what we have achieved, gained and lost, as a global community, in our collective response to a truly global crisis. It offers a moment for pause, reflection and, I urge, renewed action to end the pandemic in 2022.

The power is in our hands to change the course of this crisis once and for all.

We have all the tools, the resources and the reasons (over 5 million lost lives and counting) to end this calamity. But as we have said all along, it comes down to a matter of will. Will governments take tailored, consistent measures to curb transmission? Will they, along with pharmaceutical companies, prioritize vaccine deliveries to global initiatives, like COVAX and AVAT, to reach those most at risk? Will individuals take the steps needed to protect themselves and others, from getting vaccinated to sharing accurate information on the virus? If the right choices are taken, we can turn this pandemic around, and build on the gains made in 2021. These include:

- the unparalleled scientific collaboration that has led to 10 vaccines receiving WHO Emergency Use Listing to protect people from serious illness and death
- over 8.5 billion doses of vaccine have been administered globally, saving millions of lives and reducing untold suffering
- new treatments have been developed that can boost access and reduce deaths

However, due to glaring inequity, these gains have not been enjoyed universally. We are seeing some nations conduct blanket booster programmes at a time when only half of WHO's Member States have met the goal of immunizing 40%

of their populations by the end of 2021 due to uneven global supply. This gap can also be seen in the fact that one year since the first vaccines started being injected into arms, 3 in 4 health workers in Africa remain unvaccinated.

COVID-19 has impacted health in other ways. Millions of people have missed out on routine vaccination, services for family planning, treatment for communicable and noncommunicable diseases, and more.

Narrow nationalism, me-first approaches, vaccine hoarding and inequity: all these failures and more have powered the pandemic. The longer inequity continues, the greater the chance of this virus mutating into new variants that we can neither prevent nor predict, locking us into a cycle of continued loss, hardship and restrictions. But if we end inequity, we end the pandemic, and end the global nightmare we have all lived through. And this is possible. Vaccine production is ramping up. During December, COVAX shipped its 800 millionth vaccine dose, half of which have been shipped in the past three months. This trend can and must continue. As we enter 2022, projections show that we have the potential to vaccinate all adults globally, while also ensuring high-risk groups receive boosters. But for this to happen, sufficient vaccine supply will be critical, especially as we must prepare for future variants that could undermine our current health tools and may require new vaccines. If this happens, it would again lead to deadly shortages of supply at the exact time when people need protecting most. The WHO mRNA tech transfer hub in South Africa is working to address just this, by bringing the private and public sectors together to create a novel mRNA vaccine. While there's been progress, the process could be sped up if companies and governments that have successfully developed an effective mRNA vaccine share the technology and recipe, and waive the intellectual property.

After two years, we now know this virus well. We know the proven measures to control transmission: mask use, avoiding crowds, maintaining physical distancing, practicing hand and respiratory hygiene, opening windows for ventilation, testing and contact tracing. We know how to treat the disease it causes and improve the chances of survival for people suffering serious illness. With all these learnings and capacities, the opportunity to turn this pandemic around for good is in our grasp. If we do so, we will save lives, relieve the burden on stretched health systems, and give respite to the legions of health workers

who have toiled tirelessly and sacrificed so much for two years. We will get our lives back, allow children to return to school, and people to work. We will also be able to dedicate our energies and resources to the myriad other areas of health needing our attention.

My New Year resolutions are inspired by this hope.

- My first resolution is to do all I can to help end the pandemic, in collaboration with all governments, stakeholders and communities. To do that, we need all countries to work together to reach the global target of vaccinating 70% of people in all countries by the middle of 2022.
- Second, we need to build a stronger global framework for global health security. 2022 marks the start of a negotiations by countries on a global pandemic accord to strengthen the governance, financing, systems and tools the world needs to prevent, prepare for, detect and respond rapidly to epidemics and pandemics.
- And third, all countries must invest in stronger primary health care, as the foundation of universal health coverage.

I believe that if we can make progress on these goals, we will be gathering again, at the end of 2022, not to mark the end of a third year of pandemic, but to celebrate a return to pre-COVID norms, when we gathered with our families and communities to celebrate together and cherish each other's company and love.