UNAIDS EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR **REMARKS**

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WORLD HEALTH SUMMIT 2026
Signature Event: From Crisis to Resilience — Innovating for Health
BERLIN, GERMANY

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Winnie Byanyima | Executive Director, UNAIDS

Moderator: *We know what works. We're facing cascading crises, yet still access to health care is a massive challenge because it remains incredibly and deeply unequal. Who is being excluded, why — and then from your experience, what has the response to AIDS and other pandemics taught us about overcoming those barriers?*

Thank you, Isabelle [Kumar].

And it's great to be here with Inger [Ashing, CEO of Save the Children International]. I agree with what you've just said.

Good evening, distinguished participants here.

You know, we often use the phrase, "Leave no one behind." This is our mantra at the UN: "Leave no one behind." But really, it makes it sound like exclusion is an accident, you know, like leaving your handbag on the bus.

But really, there's nothing accidental about a girl being denied education.

Nothing accidental about a woman who is denied control over her own body.

It's not accidental. There's nothing accidental about a child born in poverty likely to die sooner than a child before their fifth birthday than a child born in wealth.

All these are things that are decided through laws and policies.

They are just there in our societies. They are created by us, and so that's what gives me hope. That what people have constructed, people can change.

So, this is where my starting point is, and I have three lessons that I can bring that we learn from looking at inequality, AIDS, and pandemics.

First, we had a Council that looked at almost all the countries in the world and came out with a conclusion **that inequality drives pandemics, and pandemics deepen inequality**.

It's a cycle, and if we don't break out of this cycle, we keep going from one crisis to another.

Look at HIV. With HIV in sub-Saharan Africa, two-thirds, nearly two-thirds of all the new infections are of women and girls, and this is not biology.

It's not because they are biologically more susceptible as such. It has to do with inequality, unequal power in sexual relations, discrimination, gender-based violence, and all of that – it's inequality.

And that's also true for gay men, transgender people, people who inject drugs – all of them, their vulnerability, is not God-given. It's because society places them on the margins, discriminates, criminalizes, denies them the services and the rights that are theirs.

So COVID came, same story. Vaccines were made within a year, but, millions [of people] from poor countries, were vulnerable. Why? Vaccines were there.

The issue is, we have the science, as Inger said. Even the money is there. But the will to share the benefits of science is what is missing.

So that brings me to that second point about the lessons from HIV.

Science can bring solutions, but science alone will not deliver health for all.

We must change the rules of access. We must change the rules of access.

We know it from HIV. When ARVs were found, people continued to die in Africa.

12 million people died in 10 years before the drug prices came down.

It took activists, scientists, progressive governments, and generic companies to fight through courts, through mobilization, through laws to bring the price down.

That was not just a scientific victory. It was a political victory.

So, we will need people organized, people challenging power, people changing the rules. We will not get it just through science, but I'm hopeful.

And my third point is that **you can't build resilient health systems, the theme, on an unjust global economy**. That can't happen.

3.4 billion people in the world today live in countries that are spending more on servicing their debt than on the health of their people.

African countries go out to borrow at a rate three to five times more than the rich countries go out to borrow. Think about what that means.

It means that these governments have to choose between paying back to their creditors or paying nurses. Paying back servicing their loan or keeping rural clinics open, that's the choice.

So, unless we cannot ask governments, because when the pandemic hits, they say, "Oh, but they are not prepared. They should have been prepared."

But you can't ask a government that is paying to creditors to be prepared for the next pandemic.

You must do something about the global rules that deny them that fiscal space to serve their people.

We need a global economy that works for all countries, where the international financial rules are revised, where the intellectual property rules that allow pharma monopolies to hike prices of medicines out of reach, they are changed.

So we do need to look at global rules to enable every country their

best chance to serve their people.

And lastly, let me say this: we are talking from crisis to resilience.

You see, with HIV, I told you how we fought, people fought and managed to get the prices down.

They didn't change the rules, but they found a workaround around the trade rules. But came COVID, the same injustice kicked in.

So, what you have is governments increasingly refusing to reshape the rules of the economy so that every country can benefit.

And then, you come to this situation: the cycles of pandemics.

Now, they start to withdraw their, the global solidarity, the global funding that was helping countries to manage in a fiscal crisis.

Now, when you take that money away suddenly, create a hole of 1.5 billion dollars in the health, the global HIV budget, that can't be replaced immediately. So you get that situation where you're worsening the cycle you're making the cycle come faster to hit the same countries again.

But I have to say, not every rich government has walked away suddenly. There are others which have stayed.

And I do want to say here that, especially as I am a guest here in Germany, I have to say that – today we have struggled at UNAIDS because of cuts, but **today our largest office in the world is here in Germany.** They stepped up.

So, it's not everyone, but we have to keep the global solidarity as countries try to manage and fill the gap for themselves.



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