

WINNIE BYANYIMA

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# UNAIDS EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR REMARKS

14 February 2022

Africa-Europe Week: Investing in health is investing in economic recovery:  
Financing for HIV, stronger public health systems, and pandemic  
preparedness and response



Africa-Europe Week  
14-18 Feb. 2022

## “Investing in health is investing in economic recovery: Financing for HIV, stronger public health systems, and pandemic preparedness and response”

HIGH-LEVEL VIRTUAL EVENT



“We are witnessing a severe reverse of close to a decade of human and economic progress in Africa. HIV, Health and pandemics investments need to be front and centre to achieve the 2030 goals. This means more domestic revenues, international financing and solidarity—from SDR reallocation, debt cancellation and ODA and concessional sources—as well as an end to tax evasion. We also need change in market and IP rules on health technologies to protect the right to health of African people and to enable economic recovery.”

**WINNIE BYANYIMA**

Executive Director, UNAIDS



My thanks to the African Union and the Government of France for joining UNAIDS, the Global Fund, UNDP, WHO and the World Bank in convening today's health financing event. Our sense of unity of purpose is remarkable, as is the need for urgent action to change course, as Africa has been left behind during the COVID crisis. The sense of unity of purpose that brings us together is remarkable, as is the need for urgent action to change course, as Africa has been left behind during the COVID crisis, with unprecedented impacts on poverty, gender and health.

Africa, with 16% of the global population and 26% of the global disease burden, accounts for only 2% of global health spending. Despite the 2001 Abuja Commitment of governments to allocate 15% of their budget to health, the average today is only 7%. With COVID, that shortfall has been exacerbated. Fiscal constraints have increased and debt repayments are a huge immediate threat for many countries.

African recovery is uncertain, and inequalities have vastly increased. With an average COVID vaccination rate of just under 12%, how can the region aspire to a speedy normalization of its economy?

And since March 2020, while high income countries deployed massive amounts, over 17 trillion US\$ to protect themselves from the crisis, solidarity expressed through ODA increased by just 15 billion US\$. Meanwhile, debt relief has only been minor and temporary, and private creditors just stepped aside.

I want to highlight the very positive African leadership that has been demonstrated since the very beginning of the COVID crisis. We welcome that Africa CDC, with us today, has just been established as an autonomous health agency and recently launched the Partnerships for Vaccine Production in Africa (PAVM). And the newly created African Medicines Agency (AMA) will allow our continent to harmonize its regulations, negotiate joint purchasing, and manufacture its own medicines. We congratulate South Africa on the news that it has developed its own version of the mRNA vaccine and this in spite of the monopolies and hiding of the technology and know-how!

Progress against the AIDS pandemic, which was already off track, is now under even greater strain as the COVID-19 crisis continues to rage, disrupting HIV prevention and testing services, schooling, violence-prevention programmes and more. If we continue as we are—if we do not take the steps necessary to speed access and close inequalities in

the HIV response—the world could face 7.7 million AIDS deaths over the next ten years—4.7 million of those deaths in Africa. If we make the needed investments and achieve the 2025 targets we could save the lives of 2.7 million people.

Financing is critical to contain and reverse this negative trend on AIDS, to strengthen and upgrade health systems and prevent future pandemics. It is clear that we should not have to be forced to choose between ending the AIDS pandemic today and preparing for the pandemics of tomorrow. The only successful approach will achieve both. The investments and approaches needed to tackle AIDS are the most effective to prevent future pandemics

We need increased domestic investments, but the numbers are bleak, and recovery will take time. Africa needs to move towards the Abuja Declaration threshold and also needs to increase domestic revenues as a whole. That requires economic growth first, domestic tax reforms, and faster global policy change to prevent tax evasion. It is hard to increase domestic public investment with losses to tax dodging in Africa ranging from 25 to 50 US\$ billion per year.

With all those shortfalls, global solidarity needs to grow in this decade, with the 0,7% ODA target needed as much as ever, and the EU and its Member States must take the lead. Support to strengthened African institutions for public health will be essential. The Global Fund 2022 replenishment is a critical milestone and requires the strongest support, and I am happy to join forces with Peter Sands in this.

Other sources of financing must be activated and repurposed to invest in health, from the SDR reallocation to resources that will have to be freed up from debt in many African countries or other concessional and blended instruments. The existing G20 common framework for debt relief is not sufficient and more robust mechanisms to avoid debt traps for African countries are needed. Yes, Africa needs roads, bridges and jobs. Africa also needs an educated and healthy population- this has to be at the same level of priority and investment. Financing must come hand in hand with global policy change for a faster recovery, to allow access to vaccines and increased local production in Africa. We are witnessing the same deadly mistakes today as were made when treatment for HIV became available. When HIV treatment cost US\$ 10 000 per person per year, a price far out of reach for the millions of people living with HIV in the global south. Between 1997 and 2006, UNAIDS estimates that 12 million Africans died because the medicines were priced out of their reach by pharmaceutical monopolies and the greed of profit versus public good. It is completely immoral that leaders

are continuing to defend the profits and monopolies of their pharmaceutical corporations instead of sharing the successful vaccines and the technologies that would scale-up production worldwide.

Let me finish by reminding ourselves of two key ideas. The first is that economic recovery will not happen without health security, they go hand in hand. The second is that the African people have a right to health, and financing is one means to ensure that that right is realized. Financing is a high priority for African political leadership, a high priority for global solidarity and a high priority for justice.

Thank you.

