



Speech by Federal Chancellor Dr Angela Merkel at the inauguration of the WHO Hub for Pandemic and Epidemic Intelligence in Berlin on 1 September 2021

Wednesday, 1 September 2021 in Berlin

Director-General, dear Tedros
Mr Ryan,
Mr Schwartländer,
Federal Minister, dear Jens Spahn,
Governing Mayor, dear Michael Müller
Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Listening to all your words of praise, I was thinking of everything that hasn't been achieved yet – so that I can put everything back into perspective. Nevertheless, I'd like to express my gratitude for the award and for the kind comments.

And I'm equally grateful to the staff of the World Health Organization for the work it undertakes on a daily basis. Indeed, the work of this body has always been close to my heart.

I'm therefore especially pleased that we are inaugurating the new WHO office, the Hub, in Berlin today. On behalf of many people in Germany I'd like to bid you a very warm welcome to our country.

I believe – and I say this with a measure of pride, which the Governing Mayor and the German Government can also have – that Berlin is an excellent base. For with the Charité, the Robert Koch Institute, the Hasso Plattner Institute close by in Potsdam and the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research, we have an incredible amount of expertise and institutional networking here. Jens Spahn pointed out that Berlin is also a start-up city. So there will be no lack of ideas here.

I believe that this centre, this hub, also reflects Germany's high regard for the WHO's work.

Of course, the hub is not merely a matter between Germany and the World Health Organization. Rather – and we heard this in today's impressive discussion – it will collect, gather and evaluate data from around the world. This centre's findings are to be shared with all countries.

I think it's very symbolic that Fabiola Gianotti, the head of CERN, an organisation which really has done good work in fostering global networks in the scientific field, told us more today about cooperation structures. It's a bit more difficult when we turn from CERN to the World Health Organization. Because, to a certain degree, it has to move out of the research sphere and into practical application. However, the basic structure of CERN – which represents multilateralism in practice – is certainly a good blueprint for this hub.

We want to be better equipped to deal with future epidemics and pandemics. Tedros has just described how we tried to respond to Ebola and how we convened the first meetings of G20 Health Ministers. Back then, to be honest, it was not so clear to me that a pandemic could one day also hit us here in Europe. We tried to prevent something like that from coming to Europe. Now, however, we have experienced it. And I think that we really have to learn new lessons from this.

I'm delighted that Chikwe – I'll take the liberty of calling him Chikwe because I find it so difficult to pronounce his surname – is going to be a link

between this hub and Africa. I don't think people in Nigeria are happy that he's coming to Germany. However, I'm convinced that you will keep on making it clear to us here in particular that we need to maintain contacts with other continents and especially with the African continent.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also shown how much we can achieve if we join forces. Experts from around the world have expanded their knowledge at a truly impressive speed and also shared it time and again in an attempt to decode the coronavirus.

I can tell you that we Germans were of course a little proud that the first PCR test was developed here at the Charité back in mid-January 2020 by Professor Drosten. We were also involved in the development of vaccines.

The fact that Katalin Karikó sat on the stage today is, of course, more than a symbol. I read your life story with great enthusiasm. We finished our studies at roughly the same time – you in Hungary and I in the GDR. Then you spent an entire life researching something, with your finding receiving little recognition at times. It was even sometimes said: “That will probably lead to nothing.” You persevered along winding paths and ultimately we were able to use the 30 years of preparatory work done by you and many others to develop one type of vaccine very quickly. That's an impressive biography.

Back in April 2020, the G20 established the ACT Accelerator – coordinated by the World Health Organization. The only difficulty, I believe, is that nobody apart from us insiders really knows what it's about. To make things even more complicated, we then called the vaccine pillar within this structure COVAX – which is not exactly a catchy title. COVAX's task is to distribute vaccines around the world – and I believe that this process has now begun. We really have to be successful in this endeavour and to ensure that enough is produced for everyone. I have been visited by several African Presidents here in Germany – the vaccination rate in their countries is two percent. The great inequality becomes clear when you consider that we now have to provide incentives to our citizens to encourage them to get vaccinated. This inequality has to be addressed quickly.

Naturally, we've also spoken to the African Presidents about vaccine production. I've said many times before that I don't believe that the right way forward is to simply waive patent rights. Rather, my view is that we have to share findings, make possible participation, issue licences quickly and, above all, to increase the number of highly trained individuals on the African continent – and thus the capabilities in the entire pharmaceutical sector. You don't have to start with mRNA vaccines – though, of course, that would be possible. However, there is a whole range of capabilities which have to be fostered in this sphere. After all, we've all recognised how dependent we sometimes are on supply chains and that these supply chains haven't always worked.

Therefore, we have to act together. And, above all, we have to understand that it's not enough if the population of one country is vaccinated. Everyone has to be vaccinated so that new mutations don't keep on blocking our path out of the pandemic.

To me, this pandemic has also shown how much we need the World Health Organization. It is *the* authority on global health and its funding should therefore be placed on a sound and reliable footing. For the WHO can help us to detect risks to public health at an early stage.

Of course, all member states need to realise that the World Health Organization's effectiveness depends on how much responsibility they are prepared to hand over. For they cannot fight or heal something that they don't know about.

We most certainly need these structures. And we need them not only to combat this pandemic but, of course, also for the entire Global Action Plan – as Tedros pointed out. We have countless organisations within the United Nations dealing with similar spheres. I was pleased back in 2019 when 13 organisations stated their readiness to work together to harmonise standards, exchange data and ensure that things are not done twice or three times over. We'll have to wait and see whether this comes about. That, too, is very important. I believe that this cooperation is necessary. And I've told

Secretary-General Guterres, whom we saw today, that we really have to make progress on developing the Global Action Plan.

The pandemic has made it more difficult to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030. It was already difficult before the pandemic. Of course, “good health for everyone” is one of the core Sustainable Development Goals. We therefore have to speed up the pace in this sphere even further in the coming years.

The Ebola crisis was a wake-up call. It brought home to us at the time that we have to put such issues on our agenda. You rightly said that the response was quicker this time. And we have to do even better in future.

In my view, our priority should be to ensure better networking among researchers. The term “networking” has played an important role here. Secondly, we have to collect and organise data. When it comes to collecting data, I have to warn you that Germany is not always the easiest country to deal with. Please don't hesitate to approach the authorities at Land and federal level if you experience any difficulties. We have to make sure that we really do set a good example here. Of course, the hub can advise many countries. That's the idea behind it.

It's important – this also became clear during today's panel discussion – that we take a One Health approach. I believe that Sabine Gabrysch and Ilona Kickbusch made this clear in relation to the social component. After the high level of specialisation there has been in the individual areas of science, to some extent this is about returning to Humboldt, to both Humboldts. With the Charité being a large and autonomous institution but connected to the Humboldt University – indeed it's part of the university – we can say quite simply that, in addition to the disciplines of incisiveness and depth, we have to focus once more today on what Alexander and Wilhelm von Humboldt practised on a daily basis. And we want to achieve that with the help of this hub.

I hope we will collect all contributions so that confidence grows in the hub's work. You have experience in motivating your people. You described this in a wonderful manner when you said that motivation comes from the belief in oneself, from the belief in one's own strength and creativity. It will be good to pool all of this in one place.

I therefore hope that you will find a good environment here that will enable you to devote all your strength to improving global health and to ensuring that we are better prepared for the future crises which, unfortunately, will probably come our way.

I'd like to thank you all for coming together today to achieve this goal. It gives us hope in these sometimes quite difficult times.