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Director-General of the World Health Organization

Excellencies, dear colleagues, and friends,

I would like to thank Mr Thierry de Montbrial for inviting me to address you today. WHO welcomes your initiative to make health a core theme of next year's World Policy Conference. The COVID-19 pandemic is a health crisis unlike anything any of us have seen in our lifetimes. But it is more than that – it has also shaken the foundations of social, economic and political stability, and put the multilateral system to the test. The pandemic has demonstrated the need for strengthening in several key areas.

First, stronger multilateralism. The pandemic has shown us that international cooperation is the only solution to an international crisis. Working together might not always be easy, but it is essential. We must rethink and strengthen multilateralism to address the pressing challenges of our world in a coordinated and coherent way. I am heartened by the commitment made by heads of state at the UN General Assembly, the recent G20 summit and other fora to strengthen multilateralism and elevate health to the top of the political agenda. I am also encouraged by initiatives such as the Alliance for Multilateralism, led by France and Germany, and the policy discussions putting forward new solutions for multilateral cooperation. Many countries have already emerged as leaders of this global reset, and I trust that the new US administration will soon join this effort.

Second, stronger global health governance. This means three things: reinforcing core institutions, more effective policy tools, and greater accountability at country level. Many leaders and institutions have already called for an expansion of political and financial support for WHO so we can deliver on our constitutional mandate and meet the high expectations of our Member States. I especially appreciate the leadership and support of France and the European Union in this regard. At the same time, we need to strengthen both the International Health Regulations and national capacities. The IHR is a powerful legal tool, but the pandemic has shown it needs to be sharpened and modernized. A review committee is now evaluating the functioning of the IHR during the pandemic and is expected to deliver its recommendations by May.

Third, stronger solidarity. Unparalleled financial resources have been mobilized to support the Access to COVID-19 Tools Accelerator to develop vaccines, diagnostics and therapeutics fast, and allocate them fairly, as global public goods. The ACT Accelerator sets a strong precedent for a solidarity-based global response to health threats. Almost 190 countries and economies have now joined the COVAX facility, which facilitates an equitable global sharing of COVID-19 vaccines. Forty countries and many organizations have signed up for the COVID-19 Technology Access Pool to share knowledge and rights to research and technologies. The values that underpin all these innovative platforms and tools are the same: solidarity, equity and inclusion. Their aim is to create more equal opportunities for everyone and ensure that all COVID-19 tools are treated as global public goods. I hope that these values will stay with us in the future and remain defining values of global health governance.

Finally, let me say that the pandemic has shown us that health and the economy are inter-dependent. We need a new narrative that sees health not as a cost, but an investment that is the foundation of productive, resilient and stable economies.

I wish you a productive meeting. I thank you.