



**Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
at the opening of the World Health Summit
in Berlin
on 25 October 2020**

**The Federal President's speech was recorded in advance
and sent as a video message.**

Needless to say, Professor Ganten had planned everything very differently today.

Here, in the heart of Berlin, the international community of health experts were to come together. Doctors, entrepreneurs, politicians, representatives of international organisations – together at a conference attracting broad public attention like no World Health Summit before. But instead at the last minute, improvisation was the order of the day. The renewed dynamism of the pandemic forces restrictions on all of us. Too many participants were unable to travel. And yet, with people only connected via screens, an international community has nonetheless come together.

Perhaps the seemingly paradox situation of a World Health Summit which has never been so important and yet which has never physically brought together so few people as this year, perhaps this paradox situation in fact contains a key to understanding our situation in these times of COVID-19.

As early as the start of this year, states closed their borders as the virus spread. We reduced public life almost to level zero to slow the rate of infection. We are all aware of the many lives lost in those weeks; many of our neighbours have more to mourn than us. Over the summer months, the virus raged mainly in other parts of the world. Now it is back with a vengeance in Europe. At this time, governments are struggling to find the right way to avoid a second lockdown and renewed uncontrolled spread of the virus.

We will all have to live with painful restrictions, show both discipline and patience. Patience which in the second half of a long

year is much, much more difficult than it was in the first six months. And yet we know that these restrictions, this withdrawing behind national borders, are not going to be the solution in our difficult situation. On the contrary, the real path out of the pandemic, the light at the end of the tunnel of our dwindling patience, is to be found in the unprecedented international effort uniting all of you and many more people around the globe. Researchers in universities, companies and institutes, entrepreneurs and managers in the pharmaceutical industry, civil servants and politicians in ministries and international institutions, philanthropists and experts, working 24/7 to develop therapies and diagnostics, building factories for the vaccines we so yearn for, untangling the immeasurably complicated logistics of production and worldwide distribution. That is why I am pleased that you are meeting digitally this evening and over the next few days. Welcome to Berlin!

Yes, I know that some now consider our globally networked economic system to be a curse. A system whose weaknesses and vulnerability were suddenly plain to see as the virus spread like wildfire to the furthest corners of our earth. But I also see something else. I see the mobilisation of huge resources and amazing human ingenuity in a truly global network. Never before have more people vested their hopes and expectations in you, the experts who have come together today. I admit: I myself am no exception.

Following many discussions with experts, I have reasonable confidence that we will see tangible progress in the foreseeable future: new testing procedures generating faster results, new treatments to deal with severe cases, new vaccines which are both safe and effective. You know better than I do that even such breakthroughs are not going to bring back overnight the normality we enjoyed before the pandemic. You know better than I do the enormous, yes even unprecedented medical, technical and logistical challenges we will face in the coming months. And yet, all of this makes me optimistic that we will gradually find our way out of the pandemic in the year to come.

COVID-19 challenges all of us. The virus knows no borders and has no interest in the nationality of its victims. Also in the future, it will overcome all barriers if we do not work together to counter it. In the face of the virus, we are without doubt a global community. But the key question is: are we able to act like one?

Six years ago, when I also had the opportunity of opening this Summit, the Ebola epidemic was top of the agenda at the time. With the help and resources of many, also many of you, the outbreak was successfully curbed. Today we face an even greater challenge, in both medical and political terms. If today we need to forge a truly global alliance, it is not merely as an act of solidarity to promote an interest that is not first and foremost understood as our own. It is also in our own vested interest. No-one is safe from COVID-19; no-one is safe

until we are all safe from it. Even those who conquer the virus within their own borders remain prisoners within these borders until it is conquered everywhere. Even those who can open their own factories need suppliers, need partners and customers beyond their own borders. A pandemic which is stemmed at home but not defeated abroad will continue to rob us of lives, but also of prosperity. The old adage "if everyone thinks of themselves, then everyone has been thought of" is not only unethical, it is also stupid.

But even if that is abundantly clear to us, the key question still remains unanswered: Will we succeed in acting like a truly global community? That requires more than merely recognising it!

I am very grateful to the European Commission under Ursula von der Leyen's leadership and to the WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus for the pioneering role they have assumed in forging such a global alliance. Also to the French President and the Federal Chancellor for their strong support back in the spring at the start of the pandemic for efforts to set the right course.

I am grateful to the 168 governments who have so far joined the Access to COVID-19 Tools Accelerator (ACT-Accelerator). I am grateful to the countries, businesses and foundations who are working on the COVAX Initiative. COVAX is our best chance of organising globally fair, transparent and affordable access to vaccines, medicines and diagnostics. By the end of 2021, 2 billion vaccine doses are thus to be provided for more than 90 low or medium-income countries.

Yet the financial resources needed for research, development, production and distribution are far from secured. Such a mammoth task incurs considerable costs. But ultimately, they are only a fraction of what governments have had to spend on stabilising their economies and social security systems during the pandemic. Money for COVAX is money well spent not just in medical, but also in economic terms!

The so-called "vaccine moment" which we will have if research is successful is – as you all know – enormously complex and challenging in terms of medicine and logistics. It also carries real political risks. It is truly a fork in the road. What we do today will determine how the world looks after the pandemic. The rules we shape and commit to at this time will determine how many lives we can save. Our wisdom will determine whether the logic of cooperation and joint action can defeat egoistic instincts and geopolitical turf battles. It is us who will determine how much trust remains at the end of the pandemic – trust, our most valuable resource for cooperation between states. In short, it is up to us to translate noble words into action!

This process is difficult enough within our societies. We have to agree on a distribution system. Who will be vaccinated when and who is priority? Above all in the difficult months when we do not have

enough vaccines to serve everyone who wants to be vaccinated: medical staff, high-risk groups, the elderly, socially vulnerable groups, and who else? Reaching consensus here will be anything but easy. But that is all the more true at global level.

It would be a fallacy to think that just after a vaccine is authorised we will have enough vaccines to immediately protect billions of people around the world from infection. And we all know that governments bear a responsibility first and foremost to their own people. It is therefore initially understandable for governments to try to secure large numbers of vaccine doses from potential manufacturers even before one or several vaccines are authorised. But it is also true that precisely because it will not be possible to produce large amounts of vaccines immediately all over the world, the early efforts of some to secure vaccines will be to the detriment of others. Or, to be more precise, almost half of the world's population live in states who do not have the means to procure the status of preferential customers. As a result, in poorer but no less needy countries only a small percentage of the population will be vaccinated while in richer countries a disproportionately high percentage will be vaccinated.

Will political leaders manage to explain convincingly that it is advantageous for all of us if as a first step some people are vaccinated in all countries instead of all people in some countries? This can only work if we commit now to rules which bring us as close as possible to the goal of making the vaccine a global public good. That is the goal that COVAX and its supporters have set themselves.

We need strong global support to succeed in what is admittedly an ambitious strategy which draws on the best in us as human beings.

When it comes to making a success of our efforts to date, no country has been missed more than the United States of America. I therefore appeal to the next Administration, no matter who is at the helm from 20 January, to join the COVAX initiative!

I appeal to China to follow up its accession and rhetoric on vaccines as a global public good with substantial support to COVAX. This will also be in China's best self-interest!

And I also appeal to all members of the German Federal Government to grant the same attention and active support to the efforts to secure worldwide fair access to vaccines and medicines led by COVAX they have shown in shaping the remarkable joint European response to the crisis!

The task that lies before us is huge. We have grounds for optimism when we look to the year 2021. This is the optimism that the global community of researchers and medics give us. But if we don't want to live in a post-pandemic world where the principle "every man for himself" has taken an ever stronger hold, then we need the

enlightened good sense of our societies and our governments today. Then we need to overcome this pandemic in a spirit of cooperation, not in the spirit of “vaccine nationalism”.

Rarely in the history of humankind have the fruits of international cooperation that save lives and underpin prosperity on the one hand and the cold consequences of an “every man for himself” policy on the other been so blatantly laid out in front of our eyes as they are now in this COVID-19 pandemic. If we fail here, how can we remain confident that we can win the battle against the much more complex threat of climate change? Conversely, if through human ingenuity and solidarity, through the unprecedented efforts of a truly global community, we succeed against COVID-19 together next year, it will renew our optimism to develop an effective and collective response also to human-induced climate change.

May we all have the courage, the good sense and the strength to work to this end.

Thank you very much.