United Nations Security Council debate on ensuring equitable access to COVID-19 vaccines in contexts affected by conflict and insecurity

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Mr. President, thank you for the opportunity to join this important discussion today.

Your Excellencies, dear colleagues,

COVID-19 has shown us many things. It has highlighted – painfully – the weaknesses inherent within our public health systems. It has underlined our interconnectedness and the importance of responding to a global pandemic in a coordinated way. And it has shown the deadly consequences of mistrust.

It seems sadly appropriate that I am speaking to you about trust just days after a new Ebola outbreak was announced in Guinea. The parallels between Ebola and COVID-19 – both in terms of the destructive nature of mistrust and the transformative capacity of creating trust – are profound.

When communities do not understand health interventions, they will not accept them. Instead, they are likely to see these health measures as threats, which can lead to violence. We saw this many times during the Ebola outbreaks and we have all seen this many, many times during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Put simply: mistrust kills. When science is not only ignored but derided, when the decision to wear masks becomes controversial and when the web is filled with absurd rumours, trust in the tremendous efforts to stop the pandemic is severely undermined. When mistrust prevails, it stops people from getting the help they need, and it prevents us from ending public health emergencies. It can even lead to people incorrectly blaming ‘others’ – foreigners, migrants or other minority groups – for the spread of an illness.

What can be done? A crisis is not the ideal time to rebuild trust. However, it can be done, but it requires listening and sincerity in acting on what communities tell us.

Let me give you an example: Our initial attempts to safely bury Ebola victims in the Democratic Republic of the Congo were met with hostility. So we reached out to communities and we listened. We trained 800 community volunteers to gather community feedback, and we analysed the results to understand why people were refusing our support. We used what we learned to adapt both how we handled the burials and how we engaged with communities. And the result of this diligent, patient work was that refusals dropped from 80% to just 8% by the end of the outbreak.
Trust has to be earned. It requires seeking out community feedback, and constantly adapting our response to address the concerns and fears that periodically flow through communities. It also requires investment – certainly more than has been the case during this pandemic.

Mr. President,

Mistrust has consistently undermined COVID-19 response efforts. Now, as we turn to the immunization phase of the global response, earning community trust remains crucial, especially against the backdrop of historically high levels of vaccine hesitancy.

As we learned during Ebola, people trust us for our actions. They look at what we do, and they judge us for what we do not do. They see, clearly, the current high levels of vaccine inequity and inequality. They see the unfairness, for example, in the fact that less than 1 per cent of vaccine doses globally have been administered in the 32 countries facing severe or very severe humanitarian crises.

The fair and equitable distribution of vaccines is essential to building trust and for maintaining international peace and preventing violence. This is about more than fairness: this is about stopping the virus.

However, equity is not something that happens on its own. History tells us this. Just as we need to ensure that all countries can access vaccines, we also need to make sure that those vaccines reach the arms of all the people who need them.

Underserved, alienated, or isolated communities including those living in areas not under the control of states, as well as detainees, IDPs and refugees, must be integrated in national vaccination efforts. Strong involvement of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and other local impartial organizations in vaccination activities can help ensure that these last mile communities are not left behind.

The efforts of National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies to maintain routine immunizations in contexts like Afghanistan, the Central African Republic and Pakistan have saved countless lives. This unparalleled access into last mile communities can just as easily channel COVID-19 vaccinations, while maintaining critical routine vaccinations. The vaccination campaign we launched last month to help vaccinate 500 million people in support of the global efforts was born out of this reach and the trust of our membership at the most local level.

How can you as UN Member States support these efforts to build trust and integrate last mile communities into COVID-19 immunization efforts? You can include community organizations such as National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies in all phases of immunization planning and delivery.

By involving these actors, you will gain insight into community misconceptions and misgivings, and will gain sight of those groups and communities that might normally be hidden from your view.

Mr. President,

I would like to stress the importance of ensuring the safety and protection of volunteers, first responders and health care workers during this pandemic. In 2020, my colleagues at the International Committee of the Red Cross documented nearly 850 incidents of violence against
health care workers involved in the COVID-19 response – a figure that is both shocking and almost certainly an underestimate.

International Humanitarian Law must be respected. Violence against health care workers must not be tolerated. We have a collective responsibility to care for those who care for us.

Mr. President,

Let me conclude by thanking the millions of volunteers who are serving on the frontlines of this pandemic. By selflessly responding to the needs of others, each of them creates “tiny ripples of hope”. I believe that these ripples will build trust and eventually turn into the wave that washes away this pandemic.

These volunteers prove that humanity is not only alive but is in fact thriving, giving us all hope for peace and security as we deal with the toughest crisis of our lifetime.

Thank you.