

**International Workshop: The end of the world? Crises,
Responsibilities, Hopes
'Hopes and responsibilities for tomorrow's world, the health
perspective'
Keynote speech by Dr. Hans Henri P. Kluge, WHO Regional Director
for Europe
Vatican City
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Slide 1: Title slide

Excellencies,
Distinguished guests,

It is a profound honor to be here today. At a time of great uncertainty in our world, I am humbled to share a health perspective—one rooted in both science and humanity.

Let me begin by saying that I continue to pray for the health and swift recovery of His Holiness Pope Francis.

I also want to express my deep admiration for his leadership and compassion. His unwavering commitment to standing with the most vulnerable, ensuring that no one is left behind, has always been a source of inspiration for me, as for all of us.

On a personal note, the values of compassion and service have shaped my own journey. My sister and I were raised by our Catholic parents with a strong foundation in Christian values. Some of my most cherished memories are of accompanying them on pilgrimages to Lourdes—40 times in total—where my father, a doctor, and my mother, a nurse, dedicated their holidays to caring for older people and those in need. My sister and I joined them as young volunteers, assisting people with disabilities. Those experiences instilled in me a lifelong commitment to serving others, particularly the most vulnerable.

This same principle—**leaving no one behind**—is the foundation of my vision for health. It has guided me throughout my career—from Somalia to Liberia,

Myanmar to Europe—always with a focus on those who are most at risk of being forgotten.

Slide 2: The public health challenges of tomorrow are severe, costly and urgent

Excellencies, dear friends,

The state of health security in our world is under attack.

Five years ago, the COVID-19 pandemic was beginning to take hold, just as I assumed my role as Regional Director of WHO/Europe.

Today, I can say with certainty: no health system in our Region has fully recovered, and none are fully prepared for the immense health challenges that lie ahead.

And just as I began my second term as Regional Director this year—unanimously reappointed by our 53 Member States—another crisis unfolded: the decision of the United States of America to withdraw from WHO.

The repercussions of this decision are immense, not just for WHO, but for global health as a whole.

This crack in our multilateral foundation comes at a time when we are more vulnerable than ever.

Powerful megatrends are shaping the trajectories of health and well-being with increasing threats to health security, climate change, aging, growing burden of chronic diseases and rapid technological change. Challenges that nonetheless offer great opportunities if we steer them to the right direction.

Slide 3: Uniting for better health: the power of collective action

History has shown us that when we come together, we can overcome even the most complex crises.

This is why **multilateralism is not an option; it is a necessity**. No country, no institution, no leader can solve these problems alone.

And this is precisely the vision that guides the development of WHO/Europe's second European Programme of Work (EPW2).

Immediately after my re-election, I launched an unprecedented consultation process, bringing together governments, civil society, and partners to forge a shared vision for health in Europe. At its core are five open hearings, engaging thousands of the brightest minds in Europe's public health community to shape a collective agenda for action.

Slide 4. A common agenda for hope and responsibility

And indeed, a rich agenda for action is emerging from our hearings, calling for bold steps. I am pleased to see that the Holy See is already actively engaged in addressing these megatrends and challenges. In many ways, the Holy See and WHO share a common perspective on potential solutions.

Let me now highlight 5 key areas for action and explore the opportunities for a common agenda.

Slide 5: Health emergencies

Health and peace are inseparable. Armed conflicts in Ukraine, Gaza, Lebanon, Sudan, and Myanmar and elsewhere continue to inflict immense suffering.

As I often say, the most urgent medicine we need today is peace.

But peace alone is not enough to guarantee health security. From antimicrobial resistance (AMR) to the resurgence of vaccine-preventable diseases like measles, we face a rapidly evolving health security landscape.

We continue to call for action on three fronts:

- **Protecting healthcare in conflict zones:** No health worker should ever be attacked. No hospital should ever be a target. We urge all nations and actors to uphold international humanitarian law and ensure the protection of health facilities and workers.
- **Strengthening preparedness for emerging threats through** early detection, response systems, and global cooperation
- **Reaffirming international solidarity:** The Vatican played a vital role in the COVID-19 response, with the Holy Father's endorsement of vaccination as an "act of love" and a moral duty making a profound impact. We need the same spirit of solidarity today—ensuring equitable access to vaccines and all essential health services, prioritizing the most vulnerable, and standing firm in the belief that no one is safe until everyone is safe.

Slide 6: Addressing the challenges by ageing: Ageing is living

For the first time in history, Europe's older population outnumbered its youth. This is a testament to public health success, yet it is also a call to action.

By 2050, the number of people over 65 is expected to double, while those over 80 will triple.

There is a silent epidemic of ageism and isolation—both major killers. One in three people experiences ageism. One in four older adults feels isolated. And social isolation increases the risk of early death by 25%.

Last year, I was deeply inspired by my meeting with Archbishop Monsignor Vincenzo Paglia, President of the Pontifical Academy for Life, and by attending Mass at the Basilica di Santa Maria in Trastevere.

We are working closely with Archbishop Paglia and Professor Walter Ricciardi from the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart in Rome on the Charter for the Rights of Elderly People and the Duties of the Community—the Carta dei Diritti degli Anziani e dei Doveri della Comunità. This initiative underscores the need for societies to treat ageing populations with dignity and respect.

Our agenda for action must focus on four key priorities:

- Ensuring healthy aging begins early by embedding prevention approaches from childhood to old age.
- Building age-friendly health and social care systems that integrate primary health care, mental health, and community services to support independent living.
- Tackling ageism and promoting social participation by fostering intergenerational connections and inclusive policies that value older people as active contributors to society.
- Supporting caregivers and strengthening long-term care through sustainable investments in workforce training, home-based services, and innovative care models.

Slide 7: Addressing violence

Globally, one in three women experiences physical and/or sexual violence in their lifetime.

As a father of two daughters, I cannot accept that this remains a reality.

Violence against women and girls is a pervasive global health problem and a violation of human rights. It has devastating, long-term health consequences—physical, sexual, reproductive, and mental. Women with disabilities, indigenous women, and trans women face an even higher risk. And despite global commitments, little progress has been made since the Beijing Declaration 30 years ago.

LGBTIQ+ communities endure stigma, discrimination, and violence that severely impact their well-being. I deeply appreciate the Holy See's messages of acceptance toward LGBTIQ+ individuals. Stigma and discrimination lead to significant mental and physical health challenges for our fellow human beings. The Vatican's leadership is vital in creating a more inclusive and dignified future for all.

Health systems must be safe, inclusive, and responsive—often, they are the first or only point of contact for survivors. This is our target for action.

- **Strengthening health systems** to provide survivor-centered care, including safe reporting mechanisms, trained personnel, and integrated support services.
- **Embedding prevention into health policies**, addressing root causes such as gender inequality, harmful norms, and social determinants of violence.
- **Fostering inclusion and non-discrimination**, ensuring that LGBTIQ+ individuals receive the same standard of care, free from bias and stigma.

Slide 8: Climate Action: A Shared Moral and Public Health Imperative

Quite simply, the climate crisis is a health crisis. Climate change is responsible for an estimated 250,000 additional deaths each year,

disproportionately affecting the most vulnerable. It is also amplifying displacement and making life harder for those already forced to flee – the millions of climate refugees in our world.

Our agenda for action focuses on three key priorities:

- Adapting health services to better cope with a new climate reality
- Investing in climate-smart health systems, including sustainable infrastructure, energy efficiency, and low-carbon health care.
- Expanding surveillance and early warning systems to track and respond to climate-related health threats in real time.

Slide 9: Building Trust: The Foundation of Public Health

We are experiencing one of the lowest points of trust in science, public

health, and institutions in modern history - from vaccines to climate change, public health measures or medical ethics.

The Vatican has long played a crucial role in bridging science and ethics, ensuring that public health policies align with human dignity and moral responsibility.

Yet today, misinformation and disinformation threaten not only health systems but also the ability of faith-based leadership to guide communities toward truth and solidarity.

Rebuilding trust demands a renewed commitment to transparency, inclusion, and ethical leadership.

WHO and the Vatican have a unique opportunity to stand together in this fight—not only to combat misinformation and falsehoods, but to restore faith in health as a fundamental pillar of human dignity and solidarity.

Our agenda for action must focus on three key priorities:

- Strengthening public health communication by ensuring clear, science-based messaging reaches communities before misinformation takes hold.
- Building trust through community engagement by working with faith leaders, civil society, and local networks to make health information more accessible and culturally relevant.
- Holding platforms accountable by advocating for stronger policies against health misinformation and ensuring that digital spaces do not become breeding grounds for harm.

Slide 10: Aligning Our Agendas for a Healthier Future

The challenges we face today are too great for any one institution, government, or sector to solve alone.

This is why I am honoured to propose **a joint action plan with the Pontifical Academy for Life** to address these contemporary health challenges.

By combining WHO's scientific expertise with the Holy See's moral leadership and global reach, we can create solutions that are evidence-based, ethically grounded, and deeply rooted in human dignity.

Slide 11: Closing

As **Ecclesiastes 4:9-10** reminds us:

"Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor: If either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up."

Health is a right, not a privilege.

Let us be the generation that does more than hope for a healthier world—let us work tirelessly to build it, and to leave no one behind.

Thank you.