

UNAIDS EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR REMARKS

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INAUGURAL ADDRESS: UNIVERSITY OF POMPEU FABRA



Thank you very much Dr Laia de Nadal.

Thank you very much for inviting me to speak here.

It is a great honour to be here marking 35 years of this great institution. Pompeu Fabra is renowned for its excellence in research and teaching. It is one of the most prestigious universities here in Spain and in Europe.

I am a diplomat, I am an activist, and today I'm the United Nations Under-Secretary General tasked with leading the global AIDS response.

I want to speak to you today about the world we are in—about the global challenges that face us—and make the case for a strong multilateralism, and about your role as students and academics, and I hope as activists like me, but as leaders for today.

Today, humanity faces an interlocking series of existential crises. As conflicts rage across the world, as weapons of mass destruction are mounting, created every day, health crises are festering, inequality is widening, human rights are under attack, entire nations are suffocating under crippling debt, and we sit on the brink of climate catastrophe.

These are global challenges; they require global solutions. Yet, despite their urgency, global efforts to address them feel weak and inadequate. 84% of the Sustainable Development Goals—a set of global targets which were agreed by governments at the United Nations—are off track. 84%. And the year 2030 is around the corner.

The multilateral institutions like the United Nations, like the international financial institutions, that are supposed to move us toward these targets, are not fit for purpose. Global challenges require global solutions. But the global institutions are not working well.

But I am not willing to give up on global cooperation. For I am a child of the United Nations. I was born without a country. Uganda, where I come from, was still a British colony when the United Nations was created. I was not a citizen; I was a subject. That was the reality for millions of people around the world.

But the United Nations played a very important part in the decolonization process, admitting formerly colonized nations as they won independence. And, as a girl born in one of those countries, I benefitted from the norms of the United Nations—for example, the right of girls to go to school, the right of women to participate in society, women to vote.

In my country, we didn't fight for the right to vote, we were not suffragettes. I understand here in Spain it was won in 1931, but that afterwards it was taken away, and then returned much later.

I was three years old when my country gained independence. But even then, our own constitution was not written anywhere in Uganda—it was in Lancaster House in London, the heart of the British Empire. It's little wonder that it didn't last, and we were soon plunged into dictatorship, four years later.

So, I was forced to leave my country and move to England, where I was taken in as a refugee. Again, it was because there was a United Nations Refugee Convention, there was the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. These were my opportunity—because all countries of the world were respecting the rules that had been made.

When I returned to my country Uganda, it was to fight for democracy. Again, it was the rules of the United Nations that we were claiming to fight for our civil and political rights. And when we won the right to democracy, and our civil war ended, we joined global movements again, to further human rights, women's rights, so that then we could claim them and implement them in our own countries. I am one of the women, 10 000 women who went to Beijing to the 4th World Conference of Women to write the Beijing Platform for Action on women's rights.

So, I will not give up on global cooperation, and multilateralism must not die.

But the institutions of multilateralism are a reflection of their time, when they were created. Yes, the UN oversaw decolonisation, but the same power dynamics of the UN today reflect the colonial era.

While the UN General Assembly operates on the basis of one member, one vote, much of the real power lies in institutions that are far less equal.

It's only the votes of the Security Council which are binding. And its five permanent members—the United States, Russia, the United Kingdom, France, and China—these happen to be the five permanent members with a veto. And only because of the power dynamics at the end of the Second World War.

The International Monetary Fund and the World Bank—the institutions with economic and financial power—are all weighted in favour of rich countries. And the World Trade Organization, here the rules are that a consensus has to be reached. This gives any country the right to veto—and very often the richer countries use it to veto progress.

So, the challenges that we face today—climate change, global pandemics, all these—cannot be solved adequately because the institutions do not reflect the reality of today. It is the rules that don't work. It's not inherent in nations not to collaborate.

The crises we face remain unsolved because multilateralism is weak. Rules are being flouted by rich and not-so-rich countries, by big and small countries, because the rules reflect a bygone era. Many states have lost faith. But those who created the system hold onto the old rules.

It hasn't always been this way. The global AIDS response, which I lead at the United Nations, is proof that multilateralism can work.

Most of you will not remember the height of the AIDS pandemic. You were young. But it was a terrifying time. I remember what it was like in the early 2000s when Africa saw the explosion of HIV. At this time, there were effective treatments available in Europe, in America. But so many of us saw friends and family members wither and die of this illness, as we saw others living healthy lives on a pill—an antiretroviral.

But this was not affordable in developing countries.

Then, in 2001, a Special Session at the United Nations General Assembly brought together all the governments of the world, scientists, people living with HIV, civil society, and the private sector, and created a framework to address a global challenge—a framework built on solidarity and trust. And the world has gathered every five years since then, committing to ending AIDS through a series of Political Declarations, which include targets. And this is where we are today: 31 million people are on treatment around the world. We have still a job to find 9.2 million others whom we know are living with HIV but are not on treatment.

A global movement of activists pressured pharmaceutical companies to lower their prices and share their technologies. Indian generics slashed the annual cost of HIV treatments. It went down from \$10 000 per person per year, to \$100 per person per year. All this was through global cooperation.

Our response is based on the understanding that HIV is not just a health threat, it's not just a health problem. It is driven by inequalities—gender inequalities, income inequality, inequality in access to healthcare services, inequality in access to the best health technologies), and inequality in the enjoyment of human rights. I am here today in Spain because Spain's health approach, as I see it, understands the importance of addressing the inequalities that drive ill health. You have here a public health system which is inclusive, which ensures access for all without discrimination. You have a health system that confronts and tackles stigma and discrimination in society. You have a government that funds, that puts resources in global solutions, it puts resources in the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, TB and Malaria. It puts resources in our work at the United Nations to coordinate and lead a global response—a global solution to a global crisis.

And you have a country that empowers women to make decisions, to be policy makers. Your Parliament is one of the most diverse, gender-equal parliaments in the world. These are core to addressing a pandemic.

So, the AIDS response is a success story of multilateralism, of global cooperation.

But fast forward. HIV hit us 40 years ago. Just a few years ago, we were hit by COVID. It was followed by mpox. We didn't see the same response. Global cooperation simply did not happen. Countries looked inward.

A global scramble for vaccines meant that rich countries put themselves first. They bought all of the doses. They pushed low and middle-income countries to the back of the queue.

This led to a global divide in vaccine access it was so stark, the President of South Africa dubbed it "vaccine apartheid". And it was.

An analysis published in Nature found that in 2021 alone—that in the first year of the vaccine rollout, Nature estimates that there were an extra 1.3 million deaths. *Extra, unnecessary*—because of vaccine inequity. 1.3 million lives lost because of vaccine inequity in access. This is equivalent to one person dying needlessly every 24 seconds.

When the pandemic started, many of us who remembered the early days of AIDS, we could see that the world was at risk of making the same mistakes—that leaders would fail to learn from the past and would fail to quickly apply the solutions of success to COVID.

We created what we called the People's Vaccine Alliance—a global movement of civil society organisations, of global leaders, experts, scientists, activists, and we started pushing for an equitable framework for sharing any COVID vaccine that could be found.

We started it before even a vaccine was found because we knew what was coming.

We worked to highlight that inequality in access was deadly. And then vaccines came. And, at one point, the companies who held that vaccine, who hoarded it and sold it to only the rich countries to maximise profit, they were making \$1 000 every second from COVID vaccines as people died in the developing countries especially.

South Africa and India put forward a proposal at the World Trade Organization—this is where trade rules are set—seeking a waiver of intellectual property rules on COVID vaccines. A waiver in a time of crisis. This would have helped clear the way for developing countries—some of which have a history of producing generic, low-cost pharmaceutical products—to make the COVID-19 vaccines, and move to share these across the world.

At first, the developing countries supported this proposal. They were in need. We saw rich countries also coming on to support India and South Africa, **including Spain**—so global solidarity was shaping. At that time, the Spanish President Pedro Sánchez said, "Unequal access to vaccines between developed and developing countries is not only at the core of a feeling of injustice, but it also poses a health risk for the world."

But this was not to be. A handful of countries, whose companies owned the vaccine technology, held out. And because WTO is a consensus-based body, even one country holding out can stop agreement. By the time an agreement was reached, it was weak, and it was almost when COVID was over. We lost the opportunity.

A handful of wealthy nations were able to block it.

So, we see there again, that the rules that were created don't work in a time of crisis, cannot solve a global crisis because they were created not to solve global problems, but to maximise for a few.

So, coming then to another part of this. Many countries in the Global South, developing countries, even before COVID, were already experiencing another crisis—a debt crisis. COVID worsened that crisis as governments increased borrowing to manage the pandemic and to manage an economic slowdown.

Then, the rich countries, through their grouping called G20, they responded. They created what they called the Debt Service Suspension Initiative—DSSI. This gave some temporary relief on debt repayments to allow breathing space to manage the crisis.



But it was temporary, and it was not sufficient to reduce—it didn't tackle the overall debt.

The world continued to pledge to do something to help finance countries that were dying but unable to respond. Then the G20 went on in the same year and developed what they called a Common Framework. This process, again, was very burdensome, it was almost impossible to use, and many countries didn't even apply for debt relief through it. Only four countries have applied. And it took another four years before just two of them—Zambia and Chad—were able to reach agreements. Again, we see, the exclusion of private creditors, other factors that limited the effectiveness of what was called the Common Framework, the G20 Initiative.

Low and middle-income countries continue to face the problem of debt. It was compounded in the middle of a health crisis. No global cooperation to get a global solution to a global problem.

Then came the war in Ukraine. Rising food prices, energy prices, inflation, borrowing costs went up, pushing these same low-income countries into debt distress. It's estimated that, of low-income countries, 60% are in debt distress or at risk of it. In the middle of a health crisis.

Now, the IMF—the International Monetary Fund, this is the part of the multilateral system that has a mission to ensure global financial stability—it intervenes during economic shocks to help countries maintain economic stability. The IMF issued a historic \$650 billion worth of "Special Drawing Rights"—this is like new money in the global economy—the largest allocation ever in the world, to help countries to recover from COVID. But the SDRs were distributed in proportion to IMF quote shares. So, the G7, the richest seven countries alone, took 43% of the new money—\$280 billion. Low-income countries went away with just 3%, \$21 billion. So, the solution did not match the problem. Those who didn't need the SDRs got them, those who needed them most didn't get them. That is what we have in the international financial system—a system that is also outdated, and that cannot solve the global problems of today.

We are worried about the global HIV response because many governments—rich countries that were supporting developing countries to fight—are retrenching. The global response lacks \$9.5 billion, and the countries worst impacted are those that are also most indebted today.

Those same countries choking on debt, unable to spend on health, education, and social protection have challenges to collect domestic revenues. That's another part of the economy. Africa and many developing countries lose significantly more through illicit financial flows such as tax evasion and profit shifting, than they receive in development assistance. What they lose in their own domestic revenue far exceeds what they get as assistance.

The United Nations estimates that Africa loses about \$88.6 billion annually through illicit financial flows. A conservative analysis from **Tax Justice Network**, a civil society network, has estimated that abuse of tax rules by individuals and companies costs lower-income countries \$47 billion annually. That's equivalent to nearly half their combined public health budgets.

The current financial architecture, the current tax system, reflects realities of the 1940s, it's outdated, it can't solve today's issues such as climate change, such as inequality, such as debt. So, again, a financial architecture that doesn't work to solve global problems.

I come now to intellectual property—the rights that I mentioned to you. I think the worst case that shows really the system not working is that of a man called Martin Shkreli—it's the most infamous example that I could think of—who in 2015 was CEO of a company called Turing. He acquired a medicine called Daraprim. Daraprim is a lifesaving drug to treat toxoplasmosis. This is a parasite which attacks the brain of people with weakened immune systems, such as people living with HIV whose systems are weak. He decided to increase the price. He took it overnight from \$13.50 to \$750 per pill. That is a 5000% increase overnight. When he was asked "Why did you do this? Why such a huge increase at once?" he said, "I did it because I could." That was his answer, "I could." The rules allowed it—the same intellectual property rules I mentioned earlier.

Patent laws allow monopolies of health technologies and allow those monopolies to put profits before the lives of people. Those are rules that must change. We must reward innovation for health in a different way.

Today there is a new game-changing medicine in the world of HIV. It's called Lenacapavir. It's owned by Gilead, an American company. It can prevent HIV transmission and through two injections every year. But it costs \$40 000 in the American market. In many of our countries, that's what governments put in. Now this is a treatment that is at \$40 000. The Lenacapavir trials show that it's magical. It has 100% efficacy amongst women and girls—and almost that amongst cisgender men, trans, and nonbinary people who have sex with men. It could transform access. It could transform access for poor people, for girls and young women in Africa, for gay men who fear criminal laws, for all those who fear stigma and don't want to take pills or are frightened to do so. But now, it's priced for the rich market, and it is not about meeting the needs of those who are most in need. Experts tell us that a generic manufacturer could make it for \$40 a year. So, we are on their case. We are moving with civil society to demand that the price comes down. The laws allow them to keep it there. Gilead has licensed 6 companies to produce for only 120 countries. 6 companies allowed to produce for only 120 countries. Excluding Latin America. Excluding most upper middle-income countries, where we have 41% of new infections. And, you know, middle-income countries, that's just a label, it's not people. People are not middle income in middle-income countries. There are a few very rich people, others are very poor. They need this treatment.

I have met women in the Favelas of Brazil. I have met gay men in poor suburbs in Mexico. All those are countries with people who need their healthcare. But they're called middle income countries? They will not benefit from a low price for Lenacapavir.

Earlier this week the Spanish State Secretary for Health, said to me that "this is a game-changer which is going to change nothing?" A miracle drug, a transformative drug cannot be transformative, unless we can make it available for everybody. But the rules, the global rules do not allow us to.



Why am I telling you this? Are you wondering now “has this woman come to deliver just bad news?”

No. I tell you all this with a purpose. I have told you how the rules of finance don't work for everybody, the rules of trade don't work for everybody, the rules of taxation don't work for everybody. I have told you bad news so far. But I tell it with a purpose.

You are students today. You're learning. It's a crucial time when you're at university to understand the world. To understand how it works. To understand its rules. The rules at play. And to reflect on the world you want to live in, spend the rest of your life, and have children, and have them inherit the world that you want. What is it that world you want?

You choose where you stand on public issues—on these global issues and on what will solve global challenges. You do this at an early point in your life. You are going to choose whether to aspire to be a top dog in a world where the rules are rigged against the majority, or whether you will question that world and those rules and work towards a just, an equal, and a safe world for all.

So, I come to you with hope. And you, as students and activists today, and as the people who will take over national leadership in politics, in companies, in public institutions, you have a vital role to make hope a reality.

I have just returned from the United Nations General Assembly where there was also a special Summit—the Summit of the Future. Here, the Secretary General of the United Nations, António Guterres, was calling for a revitalization of the multilateral system so that it can address today's interconnected challenges—climate change, nuclear proliferation, artificial intelligence that is unregulated, conflicts that are unending. He was calling for global governance rules that are more inclusive, that meet the needs of all people, all countries, that allow the participation of all governments to shape global solutions, that involve businesses, local authorities, and young people in decision-making. He was calling for that.

The governments rallied. They agreed what is now called the Pact for the Future, meaning they have now committed to enter a process of reforming these global rules that I've been talking about.

I am myself a 20th century activist. I cut my teeth in the struggles of women's rights, in the struggles for democracy on our continent in Africa, and for the equal rights of people living in developing countries. At this summit, I was proud to lead my team of the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS. We contributed to making the case for a stronger multilateralism, a more rules-based world where rules are shaped by all.

Three key agreements were reached. First, the reform of global institutions—what I've been talking about. The Secretary-General called on countries and they agreed to get the rules to look like today's world—particularly the Security Council, to address the question of under-representation of other countries and regions, and make it a strong and effective and inclusive Security Council. I see change there. This will happen. It must happen. He called for the reform of the international financial architecture, and that too was agreed as one of the key things that will start to happen—the inclusion

of the voice of the developing countries being stronger in the international financial institutions, addressing the debt question in a comprehensive way, and so on. So, reform of the global rules.

Secondly, there was an agreement about accelerating progress to the Sustainable Development Goals by mobilizing the resources needed and a stronger commitment to include young people in the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Third, there was an agreement called a "Global Digital Compact". This is primarily focused, not only on regulating artificial intelligence, addressing and preventing its unethical use, but also enhancing its use for the development of all parts of the world, to ensure that artificial intelligence benefits everyone and is used ethically. The Global Digital Compact, again, all these are things that are beginning—not documents agreed, signed, and sealed. So, the work is there to do for all of us. How can you contribute to a more effective global system? A rules-based world that ensures peace and security, human rights, gender equality, and protection of the future generations? We have here in the Pact for the Future the seeds planted for these important reforms. So, there is hope. But not only in the UN. Even outside the UN there are multilateral organizations where effort is being made for change.

We have discussed how rich people are not paying their fair share of taxes. They're dodging. A **report** by economist Gabriel Zucman found that billionaires are paying an effective tax rate of just 0.3%. Do you know what we pay? Other people pay on average on their income at least 30%. Sometimes up to even 50%. The billionaires pay 0.3%-some, nothing.

A guy like Elon Musk who owns Tesla, who owns the world, he says "I don't have a salary". He claims to have no salary, so he's not taxed on income. And then his companies say, "We are not sharing dividends". They make profits, but they say they don't share dividends. So, there's no taxes on dividends. They say they are investing. So, they have found ways to stay outside the tax bracket.

But hope is there. At the G20 this year, under the leadership of Brazil, they are asking to establish a global minimum wealth tax. Because a tax of just 2% levied on the world's 3000 richest people could deliver \$250 billion per year to address these crises I've been talking about.

The wealth tax implemented here in Spain, as I understand, in response to COVID was bolder than this. If it could be implemented globally, it could **raise as much as** \$2 trillion every year. Hope is there.

At the UN, too, there is a UN Framework Convention on international tax cooperation that is in the making. That will mean that there's more global cooperation on taxation, less tax dodging, profit shifting across borders. So, although this tax collaboration is being pushed forward, we are still seeing that those countries for whom the profits land in their countries are resisting this preparing for the tax convention. So, you're young Europeans. You can play an important role in getting, supporting, popularizing, and ensuring that such rules do change.

So, I hope you go forward from today with your eyes wide to the challenges of the world, understanding the need for global collaboration, global cooperation on global challenges.

Today, as students, you can shape the social movements that will compel our leaders to address these challenges with speed. They've signed a Pact for the Future. They've guaranteed that this future will include young people in decision-making. Seize on that. Join the movements and pressure for change.

In the years ahead, you will be the leaders sitting in those seats at those tables where these decisions must be made.

Wherever your life or your career takes you, I hope you will keep thinking about global solutions to global challenges. That you will stand on the side of justice. I hope you will invest time at this glorious institution, these wonderful facilities, and you will spend your time reflecting on a fair, just world for yourself and for the next generation. And I hope you will continue to contribute to creating that world where global challenges find global solutions.

Thank you so much.

