Hello colleagues,

Thank you for joining the first Technical Advisory Group meeting on COVID-19 mortality assessment. Every country should know the scope and scale of the epidemic to shape its response. This is indeed a once in a lifetime opportunity to collectively understand and address the true impact of the pandemic and influence our response.

As global headlines have shown, one of the biggest challenges we are facing is our inability to accurately report on deaths and causes of death. We recognize there is no easy solution, however we need to find ways to support all countries.

Our priority is to establish the impact of the pandemic across time and space so that we address inequalities using disaggregated data, support Member States’ response and recovery efforts, and assess the impact on global health estimates and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

To do this, globally comparable data using established standards and methods is crucial.
As of 19 February 2021, countries have reported 2.4 million COVID-19 deaths to WHO and there is a wide variation across regions and countries.

These variations are often due to various factors that limit our ability to accurately record deaths such as differences in access to testing, diagnostic capacity, variations in how COVID-19 deaths are defined which can lead to significant under reporting, and misattributions.

WHO is working with Member States and partners to address these challenges by:

- Establishing and sharing guidance on COVID-19 medical certification and coding of causes of death via the International Classification of Diseases.
- Supporting countries through rapid mortality surveillance which provides a more complete picture of impact, particularly for deaths that may be indirectly related to COVID-19 and are occurring outside of health facilities.
- Working with countries to collect weekly mortality data aggregated by sex, age, and cause of death as reported on official death certificates. Thus far we have received data from 34 countries.

As a result, we are seeing improvements in the reporting of deaths and all causes.
Various partners and media outlets such as the Economist are making huge contributions to tracking excess deaths and have shown that in many parts of the world, the official death tolls undercount the total number of fatalities.

Excess mortality is a straightforward measure to assess the direct and indirect impact of COVID-19 on mortality by taking into account both expected and observed mortality over time.

A more granular level of excess deaths by age group is also possible where high-quality data is available and where we can disaggregate by age and by other variables.

Alas, many countries still don’t have comprehensive civil registration and vital statistics systems, especially in low-resource settings. Without such data, we are not able to provide optimal accuracy in our reports.

Major data gaps also exist in national time series data for all-cause deaths for 2020. It is shocking to note that over 124 countries lack this data for 2020.
I would like to take this opportunity to emphasize the importance of good civil registration and vital statistics systems to improve in this area.

Many partners have done a fantastic job in compiling various datasets and made their models available publicly.

In summary, disparities exist in the availability of all-cause mortality data, which is needed to measure excess mortality. This reflects the deeper disparities in underlying civil registration and vital statistics systems.

Now is the time for the best minds and partners to collectively and rapidly scale up our resources and work together to solve these long-standing challenges. It is the only way we will know for certain how ready we are for the next public health emergency.

Your work is critical, and I thank you again for your time, energy and commitment.