



OPEN LETTER TO HEALTH AND FINANCE MINISTERS IN THE COUNTRIES WITH COVID-19 OXYGEN SHORTAGES

29 March 2021

Honorable Ministers,

There is no official count yet of the number of COVID-19 patients who have died because they could not get oxygen, but recent evidence suggests that number will be high. For more than 12 months now, there have been constant reports of oxygen-related COVID-19 deaths across Latin America, Asia, and Africa.

These are heartbreaking stories. From **Thalita Rocha**'s mother-in-law who suffocated to death in Brazil after the hospital ran out of oxygen, to **Mureed Ali**'s mother who died in Pakistan as the hospital waited for the delivery of more oxygen cylinders, to **Paul Msoma** who died in a hospital in Malawi that had oxygen but no flowmeters. These personal tragedies add up to a global oxygen crisis that is targeting our most vulnerable.

As you know, clinical care options for COVID-19 patients are currently very limited, with oxygen and steroids such as dexamethasone the only proven lifesaving treatments for seriously ill patients. The oxygen needs of COVID-19 patients are extremely high, sometimes 10 to 20 times higher than for other patients, and this has caused an exponential increase in the demand for oxygen over the past year.

With the daily oxygen need across all low- and middle-income countries estimated at 11,800,000 cubic meters per day, or 1,700,000 large cylinders,¹ many health facilities are overwhelmed and running out of oxygen as the families of patients often wait for days and pay exorbitant prices for scarce oxygen supplies while their loved ones suffer.

To help your countries respond to the oxygen crisis, the Access to COVID-19 Tools Accelerator (ACT-A) announced an **Oxygen Emergency Response** on 25 February 2021 with an immediate injection of \$US20 million from Unitaid and the Wellcome Trust, and a call for \$US90 million to support the 20 worst-affected countries as part of a 12 month multi-billion response to the crisis.

To mobilize these additional resources the Every Breath Counts Coalition calls on your governments to increase national spending on medical oxygen, and to work with the international development banks and agencies - the World Bank and the Global Fund, Unitaid, WHO, and UNICEF - donor governments, NGOs, and the medical gas industry to ensure that any unspent COVID-19 relief funds and future funds that will be made available by the ACT-A Oxygen Emergency Response are used to close the gaps in oxygen access.

Investing in oxygen now will not only help your countries reduce COVID-19 deaths, but will continue to save lives beyond the pandemic – including among newborns, children, women in childbirth, adults with communicable and non-communicable diseases, and patients requiring surgery - as oxygen is an essential medicine needed to treat many causes and conditions.

While your populations wait for COVID-19 vaccines to reach full coverage, the coming months will bring more infections and a continued need for more oxygen to reduce fatality rates. The Every Breath Counts Coalition will continue to call for more support for LMIC governments and stands ready to support your increased efforts to work with national, regional, and international partners to ensure that not one more patient dies for lack of oxygen during the pandemic.

Every Breath Counts is a coalition of United Nations and multilateral health and development agencies, companies, foundations, non-government organizations (NGOs), and academic institutions supporting low- and middle-income countries to reduce deaths from pneumonia, including from COVID-19.

¹ The **COVID-19 Oxygen Needs Tracker**, 26 March 2021