The Americas have always been a world leader in disease control and elimination. In 1994, we were the first region in the world to eliminate polio, and in 2016 we achieved measles-free status. In 2017, Haiti was the last country to report a neonatal tetanus case.

Yet our national immunization programs have suffered serious setbacks over the last decade. We have witnessed decreases in vaccination coverage rates; inadequate sustainable financing for immunizations; and increasing vaccine hesitancy linked in part to misinformation.

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated each one of these trends.

As a result, the Americas are facing an impending crisis around vaccination services. In 2021, more than 2.7 million children younger than 1 year (i.e., one in five children in this age group) did not receive all their vaccine doses, leaving them susceptible to diseases such as polio, tetanus, measles, and diphtheria.

As we emerge from the devastating effects of the pandemic, we find that the risk of new and reemerging outbreaks in our Region is at a 30-year high.

The Ministries of Health of our countries and territories are working closely with PAHO and other technical partners and donors to recover the vaccination coverage rates that protected us in the past. One event in particular helps countries maintain vaccinations on their political agenda.

The 21st Annual Vaccination Week in the Americas (VWA) will be held from 22 to 29 April 2023, in conjunction with the 12th WHO’s World Immunization Week (WIW). This year’s VWA campaign focuses on the importance for persons of all ages to receive all vaccine doses for which they are eligible. The slogan for this campaign is a call to action: “Get up to date #EachVaccineCounts”.

This slogan reminds us that everyone, everywhere, and at every age can fully benefit from vaccines to improve good health and well-being.

Over the last 20 years, VWA has been an extraordinary strategy to complement the efforts of national immunization programs. Since its inception, more than 1 billion people of all ages have been vaccinated under the VWA umbrella.
Last year alone, 43 of our countries and territories participated in the VWA, reaching more than 68 million people with at least one vaccine dose.

This year, we hope to reach more than 92 million people across our Region.

Also this year, the World Health Organization will celebrate The Big Catch-Up campaign. This is a year-long effort for WHO and its partners to catch-up on essential immunizations after the trials of the pandemic, and get back on track to ensure more people are protected from preventable diseases.

PAHO’s and WHO’s commitment to strengthening national immunization programs does not stop at these events.

First, we collaborate closely with Ministries of Health to strengthen their national immunization programs, improve and reinforce cold chain operations throughout the region, build capacity among health workers and Immunization officials, and continue to expand vaccine access.

Also, for more than 40 years, PAHO’s Regional Revolving Funds provided access to safe and quality vaccines, essential medicines and strategic health supplies at affordable prices for countries and territories. Through these mechanisms, participating countries and territories improve their purchasing power by approximately 75% for vaccines and ensure the sustainability of their essential health programs.

Finally, PAHO is investing in vaccine production in our Region. In September 2021, it selected two centers – Sinergium Biotech in Argentina and Bio-Manguinhos Institute of Technology on Immunobiologicals at the Oswaldo Cruz Foundation (FIOCRUZ) in Brazil – as regional hubs for the development and production of mRNA-based vaccines in a bid to tackle COVID-19 and future infectious-disease challenges.

At each step, PAHO works with the highest political and technical authorities of our Member States and partners to modernize immunization programs and implement innovative approaches to better tackle the challenges the pandemic has brought forth.

We must remember that our national immunization programs are our first line of defense against outbreaks. The road to recovery is long, but each one of us can do our part to protect ourselves and our loved ones. And we can start by getting all our shots during Vaccination Week in the Americas. Get up-to-date. Each Vaccine Counts. Thank you.