

## **58th DIRECTING COUNCIL**

**72nd SESSION OF THE REGIONAL COMMITTEE OF WHO FOR THE AMERICAS**

*Virtual Session, 28-29 September 2020*

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**WELCOMING REMARKS BY DR. CARISSA F. ETIENNE  
DIRECTOR OF THE PAN AMERICAN SANITARY BUREAU  
AND REGIONAL DIRECTOR FOR THE AMERICAS OF THE  
WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION**

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**58th Directing Council of PAHO  
72nd Session of the WHO Regional Committee for the Americas**

Outgoing President of the 57th Directing Council, Honorable Daniel Salas Perez,  
Minister of Health of Costa Rica,  
Prime Minister of Barbados, The Honorable Mia Mottley,  
President of Colombia, Honorable Iván Duque Márquez,  
Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services of the United States  
of America, Honorable Dr. Alex Azar II,  
Secretary General of the Organization of American States,  
Honorable Luis Almagro Lemes,  
President of the Inter-American Development Bank, Honorable Luis Alberto Moreno,  
Director General of the World Health Organization, Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus,  
Honorable Ministers and Secretaries of Health of Member States  
of the Pan American Health Organization,  
Distinguished Member State Delegates,  
Eminent Members of the Diplomatic Corps,  
Representatives of Non-Governmental Organizations in official relations with the Pan  
American Health Organization,  
Representatives of the United Nations and Other Specialized Agencies,  
Fellow PAHO and WHO Colleagues,  
Honored Guests,  
Esteemed Ladies and Gentlemen,

A very Good Morning to you all.

It is with immense gratitude that I warmly welcome each of you to this the 58th Directing Council of the Pan American Health Organization. On behalf of all PAHO personnel, I wish to sincerely thank you for your presence and participation at this Governing Bodies Meeting, which is being conducted virtually for the first time in our 118-year history. As I reflect, I firmly believe that when we rang-in this New Year, none of us would ever have imagined the kind of year that 2020 has turned out to be.

Sadly, as of 25 September 2020, the Region of Americas had recorded more than 16.1 million cases and we must mourn the untimely deaths of 543,883 people due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Twenty-twenty has certainly delivered more challenges than we anticipated, and it has truly tested our mettle in more ways than one. However, that we are here today in September 2020 is an eloquent testimony and compelling demonstration of our individual and collective resilience. Indeed, we may have been knocked down, but we are far from having been knocked out.

I wish to sincerely acknowledge the leadership and collaboration of the Governments of the Region which have displayed great fortitude as they have battled this virus.

This pandemic- which has had a devastating impact on every facet of our lives- has impaired the physical and mental health of our populations, overwhelmed our health systems to sometimes near breaking point, trampled our economies, disrupted our social interactions and social cohesion at many levels, and placed a glaring global spotlight on the inequities that continue to persist in individual countries, in our region and across the world. We have had to face the sobering fact that inequalities can result not only from differences in the social, economic, ethnic, and other determinants of health, but also from differences in the very systems of governance in the Region.

We have witnessed that persons in relatively low-paying jobs, including those in the informal economy, who could not work remotely, and those whose living conditions did not facilitate adequate physical distancing, were at greater risk for infection. Epidemiologic data has confirmed that persons over age 60 and persons living with underlying health conditions, including noncommunicable diseases, were more likely to have serious disease and to die from COVID-19. Further, we have painfully observed that persons residing in conditions of vulnerability such as indigenous peoples, Afro-descendants, residents of nursing homes, and those with limited access to health services were also more likely to have poor outcomes, once infected.

Additionally, we are all acutely aware of the impact that this pandemic has had on our national economies as well as its projected future risks to the national, regional and global economies. The United Nations Economic Council for Latin America and the Caribbean, [ECLAC] has documented a significant decline in the demand for tourism services during the first four months of 2020 as evidenced by a reduction in international tourist arrivals by 35 percent in South America, 39 percent in the Caribbean and 35 percent in Central America, when compared with data from the same period in the previous year. They have also recorded a diminution in remittance inflows by 7 percent up to May 2020 as compared with the same period in 2019. ECLAC has projected that the

number of people living in poverty in the Americas will grow by 45.4 million in 2020, and that within this group, the number of people living in extreme poverty could be expected to increase by 28.5 million. Additionally, ECLAC has forecasted a regional average decline of 9.1 percent in Gross Domestic Product in 2020, all as a result of the pandemic.

Your Excellencies, Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen:

Despite these tremendously negative economic trends and projections together with those heated debates and arguments that there must be a balance between health and the economy, we must state unequivocally that there can be no competition between health and the economy, because health and the economy are inextricably intertwined. Without healthy people to drive production, enjoy the fruits of their labors and boost the economy, there will only be societal, economic, and developmental stagnation. Indeed, a healthy nation is a wealthy nation and every life matters.

Similarly, the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on the health of populations, health systems and social protection mechanisms, high-priority public health programs such as immunization and its stark amplification of inequities and inequalities in health will demand adaptations, innovation and reorientation of our technical cooperation as it cannot be business as usual either for PASB or for our Member States.

COVID-19 has deepened our awareness of the need for accelerated multisectoral actions that utilize whole-of-government, whole-of-society, health-in-all-policies approaches. Strengthened advocacy for corporate social responsibility and the development of win-win solutions that enable the private sector to provide health-supporting options and products are actions that must be taken post-COVID-19. We must collectively develop integrative, alternative, and innovative strategies not only to facilitate the region's recovery, but also to protect and sustain those hard-won public health gains that we have achieved over the past decades, never forgetting that health is a public good, essential for all of us, for all sectors, and for sustainable national development.

We must substantially increase our investments in social protection mechanisms that will lift vulnerable people from the throes of poverty and protect them during health emergencies and we must increase investments in our health systems to ensure that they are inclusive, expansive, adaptive and responsive. We must invest in our health workers, in the health services we offer, in the quality of care that we provide, in our health information systems, in science and in our communities. We must be better prepared for the future!

I firmly believe that with Pan Americanism and solidarity as our watchwords together with your insightful guidance and the unstinting collaboration and cooperation

of our partners at the national, sub-regional, regional, and global levels, PAHO will contribute significantly to your rebuilding of more equitable, resilient and people-centered health systems and social protection mechanisms.

It is against this complex tapestry of events that we are convening here today. We have a full and interesting agenda to consider over these two days and I do hope that this forum will provide an avenue for sharing valuable lessons learned and best practices; for generating innovative thinking; and for developing creative solutions for some of our most pressing problems. The outcomes of your deliberations will contribute to strengthening our collaboration and technical cooperation with you- our Member States- and in improving the health and well-being of the peoples of the Americas.

The post-COVID world will be shaped by decisions being made in the fight against the virus. The profound uncertainty about the virus and its trajectory, and about how other countries will respond, only magnifies the importance of leadership. At the very least, leaders of our region and indeed from across the world must cooperate to fight against the virus and to collectively eliminate it. They must do so without being distracted by political differences but by focusing on the extraordinary challenges that lie within their own borders. They must make the case to their citizens that security at home requires cooperation abroad. The monumental loss of human lives resulting from this pandemic should be a sufficiently powerful reminder of the imperative need for meaningful and equitable change at the level of society and individuals.

Before concluding, I would like to take this opportunity to express my genuine gratitude to those Member States who, in July 2020, made payments of assessed contributions that were owing. These payments have certainly alleviated some of the severe financial constraints and risks that the Organization had been facing in 2020 and for this, I am extremely grateful.

In conclusion, Excellencies, Distinguished Representatives and Friends of PAHO:

Although we may be apart out of necessity, we must remain linked together in solidarity, energized by the spirit of Pan Americanism and united in our resolve to better the health, the well-being and the lives of the peoples of the Region of the Americas, leaving no one behind.

Once again, a very warm welcome to you all.

I thank you for your kind attention.

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