



**Pan American
Health
Organization**



**World Health
Organization**
REGIONAL OFFICE FOR THE
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69th SESSION OF THE REGIONAL COMMITTEE OF WHO FOR THE AMERICAS

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**OPENING REMARKS BY AMBASSADOR NESTOR MENDEZ
ASSISTANT SECRETARY GENERAL
OF THE ORGANIZATION OF AMERICAN STATES**

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It is a pleasure and honor for me, on behalf of the Organization of American States, to take part in the 29th Pan American Sanitary Conference. Let me begin by expressing my sincere condolences and solidarity with all the nations that have endured devastating natural disasters in recent days. Our thoughts are with all the families who have lost loved ones and with those who have been otherwise impacted.

I take this opportunity to congratulate Dr. Carissa Etienne for her leadership, commitment and success in improving the health of the peoples of the Americas over the last five years. I also want to join the Pan American Health Organization in celebrating its 115th years at the forefront of regional public health in our hemisphere. PAHO is one of the longest-standing institutions of the inter-American system and an entity with which the OAS has permanent ties. I commend its dedication to achieving sustainable development and reducing inequalities in the region.

From an OAS perspective, the health and well-being of our citizens is an essential component to our agenda on rights and equity, as we are committed in providing "More Rights for More People." We recognize that access to health is a fundamental human right and that we need to work together, joining efforts with PAHO and other strategic partners to realize this right in our hemisphere.

The Americas bears the unenviable distinction of having the highest socioeconomic disparities, a status that has inevitably translated into insufficient access to quality health services and high mortality due to many health related issues particularly of vulnerable groups.

In recent years, the region has faced many health challenges, such as the Zika Virus. The magnitude of this epidemic challenged institutional capacity, yet PAHO successfully responded in a coordinated way at the national, regional and multilateral level.

In light of the serious consequences on the health of pregnant women and their children, this virus should also be viewed from a rights and equity perspective. As such,

we must redouble our efforts to working towards the right to integral, universal, and quality health for women and children.

In this sense, I want to reiterate the availability of our political forum as a space for dialogue so that the OAS, PAHO, member countries and all stakeholders can discuss and exchange ideas, proposing solutions for the development of inclusive and comprehensive public policies to advance the maternal health agenda in the region.

I would also like to congratulate the countries of the region for their progress towards ensuring that every woman, man and child can live a healthy productive life. The Sustainable Health Agenda for the Americas reveals the commitment of these countries with the values of this Organization. This effort is a clear example of Pan American solidarity for "the promotion of shared interests and responsibilities, facilitating collective efforts to achieve common goals" in our countries.

This Agenda presents us with an extraordinary yet challenging opportunity to improve people's lives. In this regard a pressing issue that merits increased attention is the serious situation of child malnutrition in some of our countries. The OAS recognizes the right to an adequate nutrition, and as such considers that hunger and malnutrition are not necessarily related to food availability or production, but rather points to the situation of poverty and inequality that characterizes the region.

Eradicating poverty, combating malnutrition and hunger implies advancing in an equity agenda as well as making progress in ensuring the rights of all of our citizens. Responding to a direct request of the President of Guatemala, the OAS General Secretariat, through its Department of Social Inclusion, is implementing an initiative to provide technical assistance to strengthen institutional capacities of Guatemalan agencies in the implementation of their National Chronic Malnutrition Strategy in the Dry Corridor region, the area most affected by this problem. This effort hopes to complement the initiatives of other agencies already collaborating in the field such as PAHO and the World Food Program, among others.

Finally, I would like to close by congratulating Director Etienne on her quinquennial report on the achievements of the past five years. Among the noteworthy achievements is the 2016 declared elimination of rubella and the congenital rubella syndrome, making the region the first in the world to eliminate these diseases as a result of a 22-year campaign that included mass vaccination against measles, mumps and rubella through the continent. Another already mentioned achievement was the successful response by the Organization to the Zika Virus. During this epidemic PAHO acted quickly in support of the countries that faced the threats and outbreaks of this disease and there is no question that its efforts contributed to the well-being of the peoples of the Americas.

There is a well-documented link between the persisting levels of poverty in the region, characterized by uncertain access to basic health services, limited access to education, social exclusion, and the overall reduction of inequality. While our countries are making great strides in overcoming these challenges, we must continue to work together towards these ends. I encourage the Ministers of Health gathered here to support our joint efforts to maximize the impact of our actions addressing inequality and equal access to health quality services of the most excluded.

I thank you for your attention.
