
PAHO DIRECTOR DR. JARBAS BARBOSA'S REMARKS AT THE MEETING OF THE ECONOMIC AND HEALTH DIALOGUE OF THE AMERICAS (EHA), PANAMA CITY, PANAMA — 20 MARCH 2023

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Honorable Under Secretary Jose Fernandez,

Esteemed Secretary General Luis Almagro,

Respected IDB representative Ferdinando Regalia,

Honorable Ministers, Member State representatives, and distinguished colleagues,

I am pleased to be here in Panama and join this morning's dialogue on the intersection between Health and the Economy.

I want to thank the United States Government for convening this important meeting and for hosting the recent Summit of the Americas on the theme of building a more Resilient, Equitable and Sustainable future for our Region.

There has been no better example of the inextricable links between health and the economy than the COVID-19 pandemic.

Over the last three years, we witnessed how this virus ignited a "triple crisis" that has stretched our economies, our safety nets, and our health systems to the limit, and deepened inequalities across our Region.

Indeed, the Americas suffered more COVID cases and deaths than any other region, while more than 34 million people lost employment in Latin America and the Caribbean during in the first year of the pandemic alone.

Prior to the pandemic, health systems were underfunded and poorly prepared for what was to come. And they could not overcome longstanding systemic deficiencies, the result of ill-conceived health sector reforms, and the lack of political attention to health over decades.

Never before has the case for investing in health and the health economy been made so clearly, and the consequences of under-investment in health made so evident.

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And yet, the pandemic also demonstrated what we can accomplish when health and economic sectors work together!

We witnessed how governments and international agencies quickly mobilized emergency funding and reallocated existing resources to respond to the pandemic.

We also saw an outpouring of support. Countries across our Region received an estimated US\$135 billion in external financing to support their pandemic responses.

This stimulus helped power the largest surge in health service delivery in the 120-year history of our Pan American Health Organization.

PAHO acted quickly to support our Member States during this extraordinary time.

PAHO distributed more than 270 tons of PPEs to 35 countries and territories, and with PAHO's support to countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, more than 1.35 billion doses of COVID-19 vaccines were distributed, reaching over 70.9% of the eligible population.

More than 1.8 million health workers participated in PAHO's health education platforms – and we trained more than 900,000 primary care workers and emergency teams to manage COVID-19 patients and utilize PPEs so they could remain safe as they were saving lives.

We are especially proud that our Region took transformative leaps to expand its scientific and technological capacity as it responded to this virus.

Countries rapidly deployed digital technologies to ensure patients could continue to receive care.

Countries stepped up to develop and produce vaccines and other critical health technologies to tackle the pandemic.

And our new regional platform is working to bring mRNA technology to Latin America and the Caribbean.

We will need to sustain these efforts and ensure that our health and economic sectors continue to work together to lead us to a better, healthier, brighter future for our Region.

The pandemic demonstrated the serious implications of years of neglect and underinvestment in our health systems. It is critical for Health and Economic Ministries to increase public spending in health well beyond the current levels of 4.4% of GDP so we can build more resilient health systems equipped to respond to COVID-19 and the inevitable future threats.

Central to this will be strengthening our primary health care systems so they can address the health needs of local communities and serve as the foundation of our pandemic preparedness and response. Realizing this vision will require improving essential public health functions and building capacity of our health workforce. All of this require consistent investments.

As we look ahead, we must also coordinate more closely on cross-cutting issues that impact both Health and Economic sectors.

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Issues such as resource allocation, regulation, pandemic preparedness, financial and social protection, and the development of resilient medical product supply chains require greater partnership among us.

The Americas' Economic and Health Dialogue provides us with the opportunity to bring together policy makers across sectors to get this job done.

Protecting our Region's health is fundamental to advance economic and social development and to attain peace and security in our Region.

Investing in health is a political choice, and it is also the right choice.

We look forward to working with all of you to continue to advance the Economic and Health Dialogue of the Americas.

Thank you.