

Dr Carissa F. Etienne,

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Madam chairperson, distinguished members of the Executive Board, excellencies, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen.

It is a great honor to be appointed Regional Director of the WHO Americas Region and Director of the Pan American Health Organization. Let me first thank the Member States of PAHO and the WHO Executive Board for granting me this opportunity to contribute to the health and well-being of the people of the Americas – a region that is playing an increasingly important role on the global stage – both politically and economically.

As a young medical doctor on the tiny island of Dominica, I was passionate about service but never dreamed of this possibility. Now – with more years of clinical and public health experience than I care to count – I look forward to this new challenge with fortitude and commitment.

A little history: I first worked in My country's national health system, then as Assistant Director of PAHO, and most recently as Assistant Director General of the Health Systems and Services cluster at WHO. This has all provided me an education in how the World Health Organization can best work at its three levels to ensure maximum impact for the people it was established to serve.

Throughout my working life, I have seen how important it is for health systems to evolve to meet contemporary health needs. I was part of the movement which reformed health care in my country. Many other PAHO countries have taken similar steps, and have important experiences to share with others.

There is strong political commitment to achieve health goals across the region. Indeed, many nations of the America's have enshrined the right to health in their constitutions, and many have made significant advances in improving access to health services.

They rightly focus not just on preventing and treating health conditions, but on the need to address the social and environmental determinants that directly impact on health.

A willingness to embrace innovation and to aim high has helped countries in the Americas eradicate polio, eliminate measles, dramatically increase access to antiretroviral treatments, and meet the health related Millennium Development Goals at the regional level – with the exception of maternal mortality. I will continue to work with Member States to develop new

and innovative approaches to deliver results with increased efficiency and coherence, and to share these experiences with all of WHO.

PAHO Member States acknowledge that their achievements are not even. Within and between countries, persistent fundamental inequities mean that wide health gaps still exist. As Regional Director, I will work with countries to address these imbalances and to prioritize vulnerable and marginalized populations. A rights-based approach to health is critical to ensuring fairness.

This will require broadening our focus – learning to engage and work across sectors, with a wide range of partners, both state and non-state. Such an approach will be critical to completing the so-called “unfinished agenda”, notably tackling communicable diseases and improving maternal and child health, as well as tackling new and emerging challenges, and confronting the chronic noncommunicable diseases.

Good health is rooted in equity, universality, solidarity and inclusiveness. I have learnt from many countries that Universal Health Coverage is not only the best way to improve the health of every citizen – but that it is entirely feasible.

Let me be clear: providing Universal Health Coverage means ensuring that the entire population has access to necessary health services – prevention, promotion, treatment and care without fear of financial catastrophe or impoverishment.

It requires the establishment of social and financial protection mechanisms, a robust, well-trained workforce throughout the country; organized service delivery networks, and reliable supplies of safe and effective medicines and technologies. It means maintaining strong health systems. This approach embodies the fundamental principles of primary health care, provides a framework for the progressive expansion of access to essential health services, and constitutes an overarching umbrella for all health programs. It is wholly consistent with our mandate under the WHO constitution.

It is indeed my fervent hope that Member states will ensure that UHC is prominent in the post 2015 agenda.

It is a truism to say that Universal Health Coverage requires political will. Yet the really important aspect of this political will is that it depends not just on commitment at the highest political level, but equally on the political will of district and local authorities, and of communities themselves. But, if they are to manifest that political will, communities must be empowered to do so.

Over the years, I have often been frustrated by piecemeal approaches to strengthening health systems and services. Health systems are like cars. You can have the shiniest car body in the

world, but if the brakes don't work, or if the steering doesn't work, you are not going to get far out of the garage.

I have also been disappointed by tendencies to second guess – or even ignore – the needs and expectations of people from all walks of life. In development circles, there is much talk about country ownership. I pledge that as Regional Director of PAHO, I will strive to make country ownership a reality, and to work that all stakeholders have a seat at local and national health decision-making tables.

I am excited by the prospect of implementing new approaches to expanding technical cooperation. Many PAHO countries have tremendous capacity – and I look forward to strengthening networks and instituting mechanisms to facilitate exchange of skills and experiences not only within the region, but with other WHO regions as well. We all stand to benefit from this.

In September, when I spoke to the PAHO Sanitary Conference, I spoke about change. I recognize I am fortunate to be taking the reins of a strong organization, which is respected for its work and in this regard, I pay tribute to the current director, Dr. Rosa, as well as to the previous PAHO Directors. I look forward to leading PAHO in this increasingly fast-evolving era of public health, and to making the Organization more effective, more accountable, and more transparent to its Member States.

I am fully committed to working with the Member States of PAHO, and other regions, and with my WHO colleagues to take PAHO and the wider WHO forward to meet the challenges of the 21st century.

Lastly, let me thank the many governments and individuals that have helped me during my tenure as Assistant Director General for Health Systems and Services in WHO. I wish to thank WHO staff from across the house. Dr. Chan, my fellow ADGs and all those working in the cluster deserve a special thank you. Among our joint achievements, I must mention the 2010 World Health Report on health financing for Universal Health Coverage; the Code of Practice on the International Recruitment of Health Personnel; the reinforcement of the WHO prequalification programme; the strengthening of WHO's support to national health policy and planning processes; the first ever WHO policy on health systems research; and the further development of the International Health Partnership to improve aid effectiveness.

Madam chairperson, excellencies and representatives of member states I look forward to continuing our work together in the Americas and beyond.

Thank you.