



## **58th DIRECTING COUNCIL**

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

*Virtual Session, 28-29 September 2020*

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CD58/DIV/6  
Original: English

**OPENING REMARKS BY  
HON. DR. TEDROS ADHANOM GHEBREYESUS  
DIRECTOR-GENERAL OF THE WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION**

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Virtual Session**

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

Your Excellency Dr. Fernando Ruiz Gomez, Minister of Health and Social Protection of Colombia, and President of the Directing Council,  
Dr. Carissa Etienne, Regional Director of WHO for the Americas,  
Excellencies, distinguished guests, dear colleagues and friends,

Good morning to you all.

I'm delighted to be able to join you virtually from Geneva, although I must admit I would much rather be with you in person.

COVID-19 has deprived us of that opportunity. That's just one of the things it has taken from us.

I am deeply conscious of the terrible toll that the pandemic has taken on your region.

I offer my deep condolences to each Member State for the loss of life you have suffered.

I offer my deep thanks and admiration to your health workers, who have put themselves in harm's way to serve others.

And I offer my deep commitment that WHO will continue to work with you and support you to end the pandemic and to build back better.

Thank you, my sister Carissa, and all our PAHO colleagues, for your leadership and dedication during this period, not only to respond to the pandemic, but also to support countries to maintain essential health services.

WHO is proud that throughout the pandemic we have been able to support countries in many ways, through our country offices, the regional office and here at headquarters.

We've brought together experts from around the world – including many from the Americas – to analyse the evolving evidence and distil it into guidance.

We've shipped US\$ 30 million worth of personal protective equipment, diagnostics and other essential supplies to 39 countries and territories in the region.

Together with the PAHO Virtual Campus, the OpenWHO.org learning platform has developed and delivered online, multilingual training, with 2 million registrations from the Americas – the most of any region.

And through the Access to COVID-19 Tools Accelerator and the COVAX Global Vaccines Facility, we're working to ensure that if and when we have a safe and effective vaccine, it will be accessible equitably by all countries in your region.

I thank the 14 PAHO Member States who have signed commitment agreements to the COVAX Facility and the other 9 Member States who have confirmed their intent to participate.

This is a strong expression of solidarity with the 10 Member States who are eligible for support through the COVAX Facility advanced market commitments.

As I have said, the only way out of the pandemic is through national unity and global solidarity.

Nationalism will only prolong the pandemic and delay the global economic recovery.

But no country can afford to simply wait for a vaccine. We must save lives now with the tools we have now.

It can be done. There are many countries who have prevented or controlled community transmission using the tools at hand.

WHO is urging all countries to focus on four essential priorities:

First, prevent amplifying events with a risk-based approach at the local level. Gatherings of people at nightclubs, places of worship, stadiums and other crowds can be the spark that starts a much bigger fire.

In some places, this might mean suspending events; in others it might mean limiting them, or finding creative ways to hold them safely.

Second, protect the vulnerable, to save lives and reduce the burden on the health system of severely- and critically-ill patients.

Third, educate and empower communities to protect themselves and others, with a comprehensive approach. Not masks alone, not physical distancing alone, not hand hygiene alone, not respiratory etiquette alone. Do it all.

And fourth, get the basics right: find, isolate, test and care for cases, and trace and quarantine their contacts.

Countries do these four things, and do them well, will be able to reopen their societies, economies, and borders safely.

Excellencies,

The effects of the pandemic will be long-lasting and far-reaching.

We still have an enormous challenge in front of us to bring the pandemic under control.

But the even bigger challenge will be what we do after the pandemic ends.

The pandemic has illustrated that now more than ever, investing in health is not just the right thing to do, it's the smart thing to do.

I welcome the Regional Director's annual report, with the successes and challenges she has highlighted, and the strategic priorities she has outlined, especially to promote progress towards universal health coverage, based on primary health care.

I also welcome the steps the Regional Office has taken to strengthen, despite the financial difficulties you have faced, in line with the WHO-wide transformation.

Even as we respond to the pandemic, we are continuing to transform WHO to serve all Member States better.

Through our special programme on primary health care, which we established recently, we will work with you to strengthen the foundations of health systems.

Through our new division of emergency preparedness, we will support you to prevent and mitigate the impact of emergencies, as well as responding to them.

Through the Office of the Chief Scientist and our division for Data, Analytics and Delivery for Impact, we will provide the evidence and tools you need to strengthen your information systems to make the best decisions for the biggest impact.

And through the new WHO Academy, we will provide in-person and online training, to empower health workers to accelerate advancements in medical care and practices to patients and communities and the academy up and running and responding to the pandemic.

Excellencies, dear colleagues and friends,

In the months to come, there will be many reviews, reports and recommendations about the pandemic, as there have been of previous health emergencies.

We must all look in the mirror.

Whatever lessons there are to learn this time, we must learn them.

Whatever changes there are to make, we must make them.

Whatever mistakes have been made, we must all have the humility to own them.

Pointing fingers will not make the world safer. Apportioning blame will not save a single life.

But by working together in humility and solidarity, we can ensure that a pandemic of this magnitude and severity never happens again.

History will judge us not only by what we did to respond to the pandemic, but what we did when it was over.

COVID-19 is a serious setback to our efforts to achieve the Sustainable Health Agenda for the Americas, the “triple billion” targets of the General Programme of Work and the Sustainable Development Goals.

But we cannot allow it to become an excuse for failing to deliver on the commitments we have made. On the contrary, the pandemic must drive us to work even harder.

We have a shared responsibility to our children and our children's children.

The stakes have never been higher. But nor has the prize: a healthier, safer, fairer and more sustainable world.

I thank you. Muchas gracias. Obrigado. Merci beaucoup.

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