
WEEKLY PRESS BRIEFING ON COVID-19: DIRECTOR'S REMARKS—19 MAY 2020

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Welcome and thank you for joining us.

As of May 18, there have been more than 2 million cases and more than 121,000 deaths due to COVID-19 reported in the Americas – this represents startling increase of 14% for cases and for deaths from just last week.

As the curve of the pandemic flattens or falls in other parts of the world, the virus is surging across our region. We are increasingly worried about the poor and other vulnerable groups at greatest risk of illness and death from the virus. The recent spike in cases and fatalities is partly due to the virus taking root in these groups.

This includes indigenous groups living in the Amazon basin which is home to over 2,400 indigenous territories across 8 countries. These groups live in both isolated villages with minimal access to health services or in densely populated cities, such as Manaus, Iquitos, and Leticia.

We have already confirmed 20,000 cases of COVID-19 in the provinces that form the Amazon basin, where the incidence tends to be twice as high, as compared to other States in the same countries. Without immediate action, these communities will face a disproportional impact.

If we want to slow the spread of the pandemic and put our region on a path to recovery, we must protect vulnerable groups from COVID-19. We must work together unrelentingly and with great speed to provide the resources and support that they need to fight the virus.

Last week, I warned that COVID-19 has forced us to address three different but interrelated emergencies: economic, social and health emergencies.

Protecting vulnerable groups is central to addressing each of these.

Our region is home to high rates of inequality, with many communities disproportionately affected by poverty and ranking low on the human development index – even within middle income countries. These communities struggle to access adequate health services and sanitation.

We are also a highly urbanized region, with many people living in dense neighborhoods. Poor social and economic conditions provide a fertile breeding ground for COVID-19, and it is no surprise therefore that these communities are among the hardest hit by the pandemic. They are also less resistant to the economic shocks of parents being out of work and children being out of school.

I also want to highlight a few specific groups that are at great risk due to social barriers, and thus require specific policies to protect them.

Women, women, are disproportionately affected by health crises, and this pandemic has been no different. Women in our region face income disparity, lack of adequate access to health services and are often subject to gender-based violence. In addition, women make up 70% of the health workforce in the Americas. So that is it to say they are on the frontlines and are disproportionately affected by COVID 19.

People of African descent in Latin America struggle to access appropriate care in normal circumstances, a reflection of structural discrimination and racial inequity. These conditions put them at greater danger of contracting COVID-19, and they face the most severe consequences of the disease.

Indigenous populations, as I mentioned before, face high rates of food insecurity, type 2 diabetes and are affected by endemic diseases such as TB and Malaria, which make them more likely to suffer the burden of this pandemic. When they live in isolation or remote areas, they face challenges from the interactions with non-indigenous groups who may be carriers for COVID-19 and other diseases and at the same time will struggle to access health services in both small villages and large cities.

COVID-19 is spreading rapidly through our prisons, where overcrowding and poor sanitation make it difficult for prisoners to protect themselves from the virus.

The same is true for migrants living in temporary settlements, or in the process of migrating, where access to health care services is very often limited.

Lastly, people with underlying health conditions are particularly susceptible to hospitalization, severe illness, and death due to COVID-19. Unfortunately, almost 221 million people in our Region are at increased risk because they have an underlying condition, including people with non-communicable diseases such as cardiovascular diseases, obesity, and diabetes.

These groups are not only vulnerable to the virus but will face disruptions in treatment and care for otherwise manageable diseases due to the overwhelming of health systems.

Protecting vulnerable groups is critical to addressing the health, social and economic emergencies and winning the fight against COVID-19.

It is necessary – because we cannot stop the spread of the virus if we do not focus on all those affected by it, including vulnerable populations.

It is also our responsibility – because everyone has the right to health, to access testing, treatment, and care, regardless of who they are or where they live.

First, we need to improve access to the public health measures that we know are effective and we need to implement them aggressively, especially in areas with a higher risk of transmission.

PAHO has issued clear guidance for countries on what works and should be done in each setting. And our teams are actively supporting implementation throughout the region.

Second, all countries must strengthen health system capacity to better serve vulnerable communities.

During a pandemic, we must overcome the structural inequalities that limit access to services. This means establishing mechanisms that support universal access to health regardless of income, pooling resources with the private and not for profit sector, eliminating payment at point of service and setting up emergency hospitals that add surge capacity where it is most needed.

These measures will not only improve access to health services today, but will lay the groundwork for faster, more equitable delivery of health innovations tomorrow – including new tests, treatments, and a future vaccine for COVID-19.

Third, we must institute strong social and economic protections to safeguard the most vulnerable.

With school closures, rising unemployment, and a slowdown of the informal economy, many are struggling to make ends meet during the pandemic. Our region has good examples of successful social protection programs, and we should be using them extensively at this unprecedented time.

Far too often, we fail to prioritize the health and wellbeing of the most vulnerable among us. This must change if we want to stop the spread of COVID-19 and at the same time be ready to face future pandemics.

It is only by ensuring human rights for all, when all peoples have universal access to health and it's socioeconomic determinants, when we guarantee social protection for the vulnerable, and when our economic development addresses the eradication of poverty and the achievement of the sustainable development goals only then will the world be prepared to face future pandemics. But we need to begin this work now. Thank you.