



**Pan American
Health
Organization**



**World Health
Organization**
REGIONAL OFFICE FOR THE
Americas

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74th SESSION OF THE REGIONAL COMMITTEE OF WHO FOR THE AMERICAS

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**WELCOMING REMARKS BY DR. CARISSA F. ETIENNE
DIRECTOR OF THE PAN AMERICAN SANITARY BUREAU
AND REGIONAL DIRECTOR FOR THE AMERICAS OF THE
WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION**

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**30th Pan American Sanitary Conference
74th Session of the WHO Regional Committee for the Americas**

Honorable President of the 29th Pan American Sanitary Conference, Minister Julio Borba of Paraguay
Excellency Charles Savarin, President of Dominica
Excellency Alberto Fernandez President of Argentina
Honorable Xavier Becerra, Secretary of Health and Human Services
Excellency Alfredo Borrero, Vice President of Ecuador
Honorable Ministers
Ambassadors
Representative of the Organization of American States, Ms. Mariecarmen Plata
Sir George Alleyne
Distinguished delegates
Candidates
PAHO Country Representatives
Friends and colleagues

Thanks for joining us today.

I am honored to address you this morning as we kick off the 30th Pan American Sanitary Conference.

And I am especially delighted to be welcoming many of you in person, right here in Washington D.C. even if you have to wear masks and take your tests.

Over the course of the week, we will be reviewing progress, discussing solutions to persistent problems, and confronting emerging challenges and exploring opportunities to advance universal health with equity in the Americas.

Member States and Territories will also be electing the 11th Director of the Pan American Sanitary Bureau in 120 years, a person who will take the helm at the end of January 2023 and lead this venerable organization into the future.

And we'll be discussing the 2018-2021 Quinquennial Report, that documents our collective accomplishments—as well as setbacks—over the last five years.

As I prepare to step down as Director and support this important leadership transfer after two terms as Director, I've been both looking back and looking forward.

Looking back, over this momentous decade of championing universal health and working with Member States to level the playing field for each person across the Region to have a fair chance of being born healthy and living a long, healthy and productive life.

And looking forward at all that remains to be done to achieve our common vision of health for all.

So today I would like to offer perspective.

I put myself forward as a candidate for Director of PAHO in 2012 because of my enduring belief that *everyone*, no matter who they are or where they live, has the right to health.

I felt that I was well prepared for this job based on my training and my lived experiences. Growing up in Dominica and serving in many roles in my country, including Chief Medical Officer gave me a solid foundation for my roles as Assistant Director of PAHO and Assistant Director General of WHO, before being elected to lead PAHO. I have been guided by the vision that universal health is possible and is an absolutely necessary if countries are to achieve their broader national development goals.

This vision has been my enduring North Star.

It inspired me to pursue medicine as a teenager in Dominica,

It has shaped my national and international work

And it's what has motivated and uplifted me every day here at PAHO.

This vision, and the optimism that comes with it, has buoyed me through the difficult times:

As the financial crisis of 2019-2020 threatened our ability to keep operating.

As annual storms challenged our Caribbean islands.

As viruses like Zika, Chikungunya, Dengue and monkeypox spread and threatened lives across many communities.

And as a global pandemic jeopardized our health, lives, economic wellbeing, and political stability.

Through all these moments, this vision of equitable access to health for every individual also guided the Bureau's work and responses to the various crises.

Through it all, we never lost sight of the immense responsibility, and the unique and powerful mandate that we have as PAHO to advance the health of our Region.

And indeed, despite the unprecedented difficulties over the last decade, significant progress has been possible.

This progress is the work and dedication of everyone in this room, and the past and present leaders across our Region, the diligence of our health workers and the trust of our populations.

Over the last decade, I've seen countries translate the idea of universal health care into practical policies. And then translate those policies into action.

- After Member States passed a Resolution on Universal Access to Health in 2014, PAHO was able to expand technical cooperation in health system resilience and disaster preparedness that has proved instrumental in our responses to Zika, COVID and now monkeypox.
- For the last few years, many Caribbean islands have been reforming hospitals and health centers in areas vulnerable to floods, hurricanes, landslides—so that their populations can always count on the medical care they need.
- And through our Regional Compact on Primary Health Care, countries are working to allocate at least 30% of their health budget to the first level of care, bringing health directly into our communities, by serving more people, closer to home.

I have seen how the road to achieving universal health care has forged new collaborations across ministries of health, finance, and education.

And how local, regional, and national governments are working together to achieve our shared agenda of Health in the Americas and the Sustainable Development goals.

Together, these collaborations have had real impact in reducing inequality and addressing many of the social and environmental determinants of health within countries and across the Region—from the richest to the poorest.

- We witnessed the United States expand health insurance coverage and embrace principles of universal health care, and therefore significantly reducing barriers to care.
- We saw how—with their backpacks in tow—brigades of community health workers in Cuba, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Nicaragua went door to door, bringing health care to people who would otherwise not be able to seek it on their own.
- And we saw how by working together to expand access to medicines and vaccines via our Revolving and Strategic Funds, through this we were able to procure record amounts of life-saving products on behalf of Member States.

Many countries embraced a whole-of-society-approach that has not only redefined public health but has placed health at the very center of political agendas. Presidents and Prime Ministers have become directly involved.

- Indeed, during the COVID-19 pandemic the world recognized just how central health is to our societies and to our economies. And countries were forced to innovate, and to work across sectors to protect their people and strengthen their responses.

The pandemic challenged us like nothing else in our living memory, and I don't have to remind you or convince you of this. And was the rarest of events in the 120-year history of PAHO.

And though we were significantly under-resourced at the time of the pandemic, PAHO was still working hand-in-hand with every country and territory in this Region, providing essential guidance and technical information, expanding capacity, and providing tests, drugs, oxygen and, of course, hundreds of millions of vaccines.

But COVID isn't the only infectious disease we've been forced to reckon with in the last ten years.

In fact, over the last decade we've made remarkable strides against preventable diseases.

And that's thanks to the collaboration of our Member States, our Region has eliminated measles, rubella and neonatal tetanus.

Ten Caribbean islands have ended mother-to-child transmission of HIV and syphilis.

Chagas disease has been eliminated in four countries throughout our Region and malaria in four others, that is over ten years.

Recognizing the growing rates of obesity across our Region:

- 15 countries have now imposed taxes on sugary beverages,
- nine countries have introduced nutrition and front-of-package labeling, and
- many others have improved school-based meals, so our children can enjoy the nutrition they need to grow.

And this is just a snapshot of our collective accomplishments. PAHO is the Member States and the Secretariat working together.

- We have been able to ensure tobacco legislation has been adopted across 20 countries in our Region.
- Together, we've reduced neonatal mortality by 15% and childhood deaths by nearly 20%.
- Right now, mental health legislation is being approved throughout our Region to bring mental health and psychosocial support directly into communities, where they can reach more people, closer to home.

As the pandemic raged, we saw how everyone, especially our health workers, young people and vulnerable groups suffered from stress, anxiety, and depression. It is undeniable that mental health support and services are essential to our collective wellbeing.

And while we still have a long way to go, I have been encouraged by the special attention that our Member States are placing and have placed on vulnerable groups.

- We see new legislation being rolled out to protect the health and rights of our elderly, people living with disabilities and LGBTQ communities throughout our Region.

- Countries are recognizing the importance of elevating women's voices.
- Across our Region, countries are exploring new social safety nets to support households with struggling finances and childcare needs, and to compensate women's unseen work.

None of these accomplishments happened without dedicated staff and health workers across the Region in your countries.

All of them required political will, dedication, collaboration, and investments to turn ambitious policies into reality.

As we know all too well, good health is not guaranteed.

When we take health for granted, investment shrinks, progress falters and people pay the price.

As I look back at my PAHO career, there are three pieces of unfinished business where the pace of progress has been slower than I had hoped.

The first is immunization.

Countries in the Americas have long been global leaders in immunization. And our Revolving Fund created a new model to collectively purchase vaccines at the lowest possible prices for our Member States.

Yet across the board, vaccination rates for preventable diseases have either stalled or moved backwards.

In just the past few years, we rolled back nearly three decades of progress on childhood vaccinations.

We now have polio circulating in New York and active measles outbreaks in parts of Brazil, diseases that we had either already eliminated or were once on the verge of surpassing.

And today, other diseases like diphtheria and yellow fever are just one outbreak away from becoming regional emergencies.

We must address glaring gaps in vaccine access.

But extending access and expanding access is just one piece of the puzzle.

Our immunization efforts have been complicated by growing hesitancy, misinformation, and politicization of vaccines.

And reversing these trends will require innovation and unwavering resolve so we can get back on track.

Vaccines are foundational to our Region's health and achieving our health goals. Please let's not take them for granted.

The second piece of unfinished business is our overdependence on the importation of medicines and medical products.

Latin America and the Caribbean countries depend almost entirely on other regions to produce the essential medicines and health technologies that our populations need to stay healthy.

And as we witnessed with the rollout of PPE, testing, and vaccines during the COVID pandemic, our Region is too often pushed to the back of the line.

Inequity fuels disease, leaves us vulnerable and jeopardizes our ability to protect our populations.

But our Region has the expertise to manufacture medical products, the market to leverage them and the mechanisms to deliver these essential supplies. We must strengthen this capacity.

Make no mistake: expanding our regional manufacturing capacity will require significant investment, but the cost pales to the steep price of inaction.

I hope we can make this a collective priority, leveraging and combining the capacity that already exists within our countries to accelerate progress.

And finally, the third piece of unfinished business is encouraging greater regional collaboration for health.

The Pan American Health Organization was founded in 1902, in part to unite countries to address a yellow fever emergency that once ravaged our Region.

For 120 years, the Americas have relied on cooperation because we've understood that our health, our security and our prosperity are interdependent.

But too often, political differences and growing nationalism have stood in the way of partnership.

Diseases know no borders. That's why we need stronger epidemic surveillance—and a commitment to sharing this data—so we can *all* stay on top of emerging risks.

Because you know, it's not a matter of *if* a new outbreak or pandemic will emerge, it's a matter of *when*.

And when individual states act unilaterally without considering how these actions impact their neighbors and the Region, our collective wellbeing is threatened.

So, as we turn to the task of rebuilding from this pandemic, we must do more to improve the health of our people by working in partnership and solidarity.

I hope that 10 years from now, we can look at our Region as one.

Where we recognize the ties that link the health of our people, of our planet and of the animals around us.

Where we offer localized care by training health workers in our communities.

Where digital technologies enhance disease monitoring, improve the patient experience, and encourage informed decision-making in all of our Member States.

Getting there will require us to heed the lessons of the past and prepare ourselves for what we cannot yet see.

But I know I speak for everyone when I say that we in PAHO are committed to supporting every one of our Member States to realize this vision. And I'm sure this commitment will also be true for the next Director of PAHO.

So as my time as Director winds down, I want to take a moment to again thank the incredible staff of this organization. And please help me give them a round of applause.

It is thanks to their efforts that PAHO has continued to develop as a more impactful, transparent, and communicative body, and this Director is extremely grateful for her staff.

Over the last decade, I have been constantly humbled by the principles, the commitment, and the professionalism of our PAHO staff—even in the most challenging of circumstances.

During the pandemic, much of our workforce was working non-stop to ensure our Region had the latest evidence, the latest guidance, and the latest tools to tackle this virus.

Many PAHO representatives working in Member States refused to go home—even amid lockdowns—so they could continue to conduct their essential work and remain available to the Ministries of Health and governments of our countries.

Their sacrifice, their courage, and their commitment have been extraordinary.

Today, and every day, I am incredibly grateful to lead this organization of people who inspire me to be a better leader and who set the bar of what it means to serve others.

And finally, I want to thank all of you for the opportunity to serve as your PAHO Director.

My passion, my excitement and my commitment for the job are the same today as it was when I started nearly 10 years ago. I tell my staff I will be working until January 31st 2023.

As I move to the next chapter of my life, I want to leave you all with three pieces of advice:

The first, is to never lose sight of your goals.

We are all here because we believe in the right to health. A right we all share, regardless of who we are, where we are from, or where we live.

As our world grows more complex and our jobs become more difficult, remember what inspired you to be here – this will serve as your motivation. Just as it has been mine.

The second piece of advice that I want to leave with you is this: lean on each other.

Throughout my tenure as PAHO Director, I've had a chance to travel to every country and territory PAHO serves.

During these trips, I've had the privilege of meeting Heads of State, Ministers and front-line health workers across our Region.

These visits and meetings offered me a window into the challenges and difficult decisions facing each of our Member States.

And while we may be unique and have our own ways, we all face familiar hurdles.

So, learn from each other. Treat each other as real partners. Look for ways to work together.

The third piece of advise is personal. Lean on God, or a higher power.

It is his wisdom, his strength, his guiding hand, and direction that has made it possible for me to confront the challenges with faith and calmness, to make wise decisions, to be a humble, compassionate, servant leader and to find immense joy and peace in service.

Let us hold hands across the Americas united in a common purpose and unflinching resolve that says we are stronger together.

It is with that spirit of Pan-Americanism that we've been able to accomplish so much.

And it is with that same solidarity that we'll fulfill our promise of health for all.

Thank you for listening, but more than that, thank you for being great partners.
