

## 167th SESSION OF THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

*Virtual Session, 30 September 2020*

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*Provisional Agenda Item 5.2*

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### STATEMENT BY THE REPRESENTATIVE OF THE PAHO/WHO STAFF ASSOCIATION

1. The Staff Association thanks the Members of the Executive Committee for this opportunity and for their interest in the state of working conditions and relations between staff and management of the Pan American Sanitary Bureau (the Bureau).
  2. The Staff Association wishes to reaffirm and express the commitment of staff, and of the Association in particular, to the vision, mission, and values of the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO). On this occasion we have been given space at the October 2020 Session of the Executive Committee, considering that in the emergency situation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, extraordinary efforts are being made to continue the Organization's work through the virtualization of enabling and technical cooperation activities. We wish to make special mention of the outstanding efforts of Member States to attend virtual meetings and, above all, to provide the support and political-strategic guidance required by the Bureau at this time.
  3. With this in mind, we would like to use this statement by the Staff Association – as the legitimate representative of staff members working at PAHO – to share with the Executive Committee some thoughts on recent events that dominated the work program of the Governing Bodies, including the financial situation, the work of the Organization, the COVID-19 pandemic, and potentially, a post-COVID work program.
  4. First, it is important to note that PAHO, founded in 1902, is the oldest international public health institution in the world, preceding the creation of the World Health Organization (WHO) by more than 40 years. PAHO is part of WHO, constituting its Regional Office for the Americas while still maintaining its identity as PAHO, the specialized health agency of the Inter-American System.
  5. In this context, throughout its 118 years of existence, PAHO's name has been associated with great public health achievements in the countries of the Region of the Americas. These achievements include: *a)* control of infectious diseases such as yellow fever and bubonic plague; *b)* eradication of smallpox and polio; *c)* elimination of endemic transmission of measles and rubella by strengthening national immunization programs;
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*d)* increase in the general life expectancy in the Region to 75 years, with an increase of 16 years over the last 45 years; *e)* strengthening countries' response capacity to the many emergencies and disasters they have faced, especially since the 1970s; *f)* drastic reduction in infant and maternal mortality; and *g)* strengthening the Region's health systems, including developing human resources in health, among other aspects.

6. PAHO's active presence in most countries through its representative offices, the creation of regional public goods such as the Revolving Fund for Access to Vaccines (the Revolving Fund) and the Regional Revolving Fund for Strategic Public Health Supplies (the Strategic Fund) for the procurement of medicine, medical supplies, and equipment, and the strengthening of cooperation processes between countries all demonstrate the importance of the guiding principle of Pan American solidarity. Accordingly, the Organization has refocused its efforts to support the countries of the Region in their response to COVID-19.

7. It is clear that continuous improvements in the population's health conditions over more than a century have encouraged the countries of the Region of the Americas to take on even more challenging commitments, such as those established in the Sustainable Health Agenda for the Americas 2018-2030 (1): "[T]he Region as a whole and the countries of the Americas aim to achieve the highest attainable standard of health, with equity and well-being for all people throughout the life course, with universal access to health and universal health coverage, resilient health systems, and quality health services," in line with the approaches contained in the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

8. Given all of the above, it is clear that nothing would have been achieved without the joint and coordinated efforts of all Member States and a Bureau that has the strengthened technical and operational capacity to meet these challenges and to fulfill the mandates and expectations of our Member States. One of the greatest confirmed strengths of the Organization is its exercise of the principles of neutrality and political independence.

9. Paradoxically, at the exact moment that countries are facing the greatest challenges, the Bureau finds itself in an unprecedented financial situation. Although this crisis has been brought under control to some extent by Member States' efforts to pay the agreed quotas, from our point of view the situation remains unresolved. The constant uncertainty around whether established quotas will be met has impacts on the institutional integrity of the Organization, as it affects its response capacity and the cooperation provided to countries.

10. The situation we all face comes at a time when there is growing criticism and weakening of multilateral agencies. To date, these agencies have been the ideal mechanism for building a more just and sustainable world. This crisis has grown amid a pandemic disease about which little is still known and which will have negative effects on populations and their economies.

11. The staff members of the Bureau, comprising the technical secretariat of the Organization, wish to express their solidarity with Member States in this situation and, above all, with the health workers who are caring for the population on a daily basis. This statement recognizes that PAHO's mission is more pressing than ever. The Governing Bodies of the Organization have significant responsibility to support a unified, neutral, Pan American response to the needs arising from this health emergency and its effects. The current health situation has changed the socioeconomic landscape of many Member States. The Bureau and the Governing Bodies of the Organization agree on the need to implement changes, not only to seek efficiencies, but also to comply with equity mandates and reduce the historical inequality gaps that characterize our Region, making a real positive difference in people's lives.

12. PAHO staff firmly believe in the need to advance these reforms and are willing and committed to actively contributing to this process, with the understanding that all efforts should be directed towards strengthening national health capacities. PAHO staff members have shown on a number of occasions and are demonstrating yet again—through their rapid adaptation to new forms of work and the high demands imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic—that they are willing to explore innovative ways of working and continuing to provide technical cooperation to countries with the level of excellence characteristic of the Organization.

13. The purpose of any change cannot be to lower labor costs or increase the precariousness of the workforce. The pandemic will have a permanent effect on the transformation of work around the world. As a result, it will be necessary to capitalize on these new ways of working, institutionalizing innovation, adaptation, and growth.

14. The most precious resource of an organization like PAHO is its human capital. PAHO could not have achieved its reputation as a leading public health agency without the contribution of its staff, which has accumulated a wealth of experience and knowledge that is at the service of the countries of the Region. For all these reasons, we call on the PAHO Member States to maintain the Bureau's capacities, consider the significance of their decisions on the future of the Organization, and ensure that PAHO emerges from this crisis strengthened to continue meeting current demands.

15. As expressed in this document, the PAHO/WHO Staff Association believes that any human resources initiative in the Bureau should be part of the People Strategy, which should be updated to accompany the implementation of the PAHO Strategic Plan 2020-2025. This strategy should visualize the type of staff that is expected, as well as the desired management skills, while clearly stating the role of the enabling functions (ranging from the traditional functions of administrative management to functions such as planning, legal, auditing, and internal justice) and the technical functions, which are those that provide advice on the various changes in public health.

## References

1. Pan American Health Organization. Sustainable Health Agenda for the Americas 2018-2030: A Call to Action for Health and Well-Being in the Region [Internet]. 29th Pan American Sanitary Conference, 69th Session of the Regional Committee of WHO for the Americas; 25-29 September 2017; Washington, DC. Washington, DC: PAHO; 2017 (CSP29/6, Rev. 3) [consulted on 8 August 2020]. Available from: <https://iris.paho.org/handle/10665.2/49170>

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