



**Pan American
Health
Organization**



REGIONAL OFFICE FOR THE

**World Health
Organization**
Americas

58th DIRECTING COUNCIL

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

Virtual Session, 28-29 September 2020

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**OPENING REMARKS BY THE OUTGOING PRESIDENT
OF THE PAHO DIRECTING COUNCIL
HON. DR. DANIEL SALAS, MINISTER OF HEALTH OF COSTA RICA**

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**28 September 2020
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**58th Directing Council of PAHO
72nd session of the WHO Regional Committee for the Americas**

Mrs. Mia Mottley, Prime Minister of Barbados,
Mr. Iván Duque Márquez, President of Colombia,
Dr. Carissa Etienne, Director of the Pan American Sanitary Bureau,
Mr. Alex Azar II, Secretary of Health and Social Services, the United States of America,
Mr. Luis Almagro Lemes, Secretary-General of the Organization of American States,
Mr. Luis Alberto Moreno, President of the Inter-American Development Bank,
Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director-General of World Health Organization,
Ministers of Health of the Region of the Americas,
Colleagues and members of delegations, friends,

It is a pleasure to greet you today as outgoing president of the 57th Directing Council of the Pan American Health Organization. This 58th Directing Council is the first in the Organization's history to be held virtually, using information and communication technologies that bring us closer together than ever in the disruptive context of social distancing, which has challenged all the systems that allow us to function as a society.

The severity of the COVID-19 pandemic has positioned public health as an essential good, perhaps as never before in the eyes of the world. Making decisions to directly protect health and life has also become a task that demands the best possible balance with other sectors of society so as not to affect overall health in the broadest sense, whose determinants go far beyond the mere absence of disease. And this has been the most complex point, requiring, in such a prolonged event, very strong capacity for joint analysis, cooperation, and constant negotiation. I think we can agree that, in the midst of this pandemic, no decision has been easy.

The human behavior on which we depend to reduce infections, the non-saturation of health services, and the reactivation of the many human activities that have been paused due to epidemiological risks all constitute a highly complex phenomenon whose factors can be stratified according to different social groups, age, and ethnicity, among other factors. Also, mental wear and tear during this prolonged health event has meant

moments of greater tension. Social communication is essential, and we must rely on other social sciences to better understand the responses of the population.

We are faced with the enormous responsibility of leading national health systems that have been severely affected by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, no matter how well prepared these systems were before the onslaught of the disease. Unfortunately, our domestic obligations have led us, figuratively, to compete against each other in a race to acquire personal protective equipment, laboratory supplies, diagnostic technologies, and many other inputs needed to care for this disease. This sometimes leads us to feel we are alone as countries in this struggle.

However, it is when we feel most alone that we must rely on the unity and principles that characterize the Region of the Americas -- where we often witness how solidarity and pan-Americanism permeate all spheres, in search of the common good. With this in mind, Costa Rica proposed that the World Health Organization should promote the creation of a repository that would allow everyone to share the health technologies developed globally to treat the disease caused by SARS-CoV-2. I have no doubt that our health systems have the capacity to get through this, but we need access to tools that will allow us to continue the fight. So, I invite you again to be part of the unprecedented efforts not only to develop the health technologies we need; and I also urge you to share that knowledge in solidarity. An epidemiological event like the one we are facing today has unified us like never before in a globalized world, reminding us that we are all as vulnerable as the most vulnerable of our brothers and sisters, and only through solidarity and unity can we succeed.

The images from around the world have been distressing and heartbreaking, filling us with deep feelings of empathy and compassion. My deepest condolences to those who have lost a family member, friend, or co-worker. Every life we have lost in this battle will remain forever in our hearts, and it is because of each of those losses that we must overcome this situation.

We are part of a web of interconnected systems: the health system, the economic system, the political system, and the international system all converge in the same space, which is sometimes very small to accommodate so many actors, so many forces, and so many interests. However, as the WHO Constitution rightly states, “the health of all peoples is fundamental to the attainment of peace and security”, and this requires the broadest cooperation among each and every one of us.

I do not want to use this opportunity to talk about when we identified the first case in Costa Rica, nor what measures we have implemented in the country, nor what our numbers are today; these figures will appear in institutional memories, government reports, and history books. I am sure that each of us has made the best possible decisions

based on the information and resources available at any given moment, and that ten months ago – or five – we would all have wanted the information we have today.

As is the case for other organizations that deal with infectious diseases, we have great hopes of returning to a society that is much like it was before the pandemic. One of the tools for this is vaccination, and through it, achieving herd immunity or at least starting with immunization of the most vulnerable groups. This continues to raise many different questions related to immunology, availability, and logistics, among other considerations. In such a tight-knit world, we must not be carried away by the desire to acquire *all* available vaccines if this prevents others from having access to a tool that will reduce the burden on health systems and will allow us to gradually reopen our economies and bring hope back to our countries.

Everyday life is now very different. Returning to a life that is very similar to the dynamics of just a year ago will depend on our ability to act with an eye to the common good.

Critical months still lie ahead, and we must look to national and global unity for the power to reconcile and maintain difficult balances so that the overall impacts do not lead to extremely unfavorable scenarios for the comprehensive health of our people. In 2020 we have gradually gotten to know SARS-CoV-2 -- our common enemy -- and certain characteristics of its behavior and evolution will be decisive in what follows. But what we do know already is that our people, showing resilience, empathy, and unity, will ultimately win this tough battle for their health.

My best wishes to each of you, your families, the portfolios you manage, your countries, and each of your fellow citizens.

Thank you.

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