



Pan American
Health
Organization



World Health
Organization

REGIONAL OFFICE FOR THE Americas

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**OPENING REMARKS BY THE OUTGOING PRESIDENT OF THE PAHO DIRECTING COUNCIL,
HON. DR. FERNANDO RUIZ GÓMEZ,
MINISTER OF HEALTH AND SOCIAL PROTECTION OF COLOMBIA**

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Esteemed members and participants in the 59th Directing Council of the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO). It has been 20 months since January 21, 2020, when the first case of COVID was identified in the Americas. The continent has now seen 87.5 million infections and 2,163,000 deaths, and this is the region of the world hardest hit by the pandemic. All countries have had to make enormous efforts in order for our health services to respond to the pandemic. We have invested hundreds of millions of dollars on the acquisition and generation of diagnostic capacity, provision of intensive care units, procurement of personal protective equipment for health workers, and development of information systems and communication strategies, and also on building capacities for decision-making and the formulation of health policies in an environment of immense uncertainty.

For years, without much success, we have proclaimed the principle of health in all policies in our countries. The pandemic made that sound principle a reality. All social, economic, and cultural activities in our societies came to depend on the ministries of health because the activities and processes of all sectors of society were regulated by the biosecurity protocols, quarantines, and non-pharmacological measures that surrounded two-thirds of the journey through the pandemic. It has been our responsibility to preserve life, but also to enable reactivation of the economy, employment, mobility, and all areas of life itself. We have never played a greater role in the functioning of our societies than today, due to the effects of the pandemic. We have taken on this mission in conditions of great uncertainty, very limited knowledge about the pathogenesis of the virus, and very limited capacity and control over the biologic medicines and medical supplies that are essential for all health services in a pandemic situation.

Today, 20 months later, 51 countries and territories in the Americas have initiated vaccination against COVID-19. We have administered over a billion doses. Fifty percent of the population of the Americas has received at least one dose and 33% is fully vaccinated. This is an ethical process in an environment of shortages with difficulties in access and very large investments by our countries. We are facing great challenges with a pandemic that is moving towards becoming a highly challenging endemic disease that will require efforts in the coming years. The emergence of highly transmissible variants represents a challenge in light of the still unknown duration of natural immunity and vaccine immunity. The fragility of older adults in terms of immunization is also a challenge, as are the sequelae of COVID-19, delayed care for everything except COVID, and the burden of disease associated with chronic diseases that were not properly treated throughout this period. However, the biggest challenge will be to understand and take action against the next pandemic.

The Region must now consolidate its health security, which means defining strategic and health capacities to protect our citizens. It is necessary to build capacities in research, diagnosis, vaccine and drug production, consolidation of information systems, and of course, coordinated response capacity. It is a challenge for PAHO and the countries that we cannot give up on or be defeated by. The Americas must analyze the response based on the principles of safety, efficiency, and quality. Sharing this information through digital vaccination certificates, as will be discussed in this Council, should initiate joint and proactive action by all countries to consolidate health security, enabling a better medium-term response to COVID, and also to future pandemics.

As I come to the end of my work as President of the Council, I would like to give very special thanks to all the country delegations for their attention and their attendance at the scheduled events; in particular, Dr. Carissa Etienne and the directors of PAHO; at the Representative Office in Colombia, Dr. Gina Tambini; all the staff members of the Pan American Health Organization; Dr. Mônica Zaccarelli Davoli; and everyone else for all the support they have given throughout this presidency over the past year. Thanks to you all. And from Colombia: a call to all countries to keep up our greatest efforts and our greatest drive to obtain, as a Region, the best results as we face this COVID-19 pandemic and other public health challenges in the coming years.

Thank you very much.
