



59th DIRECTING COUNCIL

73rd SESSION OF THE REGIONAL COMMITTEE OF WHO FOR THE AMERICAS

Virtual Session, 20-24 September 2021

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**CLOSING 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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**59th Directing Council of PAHO
73rd Session of the WHO Regional Committee for the Americas**

President of the 59th Directing Council, Honorable Dr. Christopher Tufton,
Minister of Health and Wellness of Jamaica
Distinguished Delegates of Member States, Participating States, Associate Members,
and Observer States
Colleagues
Esteemed Ladies and Gentlemen

Let me say good morning.

We have come to the end of a truly inspiring and what has been a highly productive Fifty-Ninth Directing Council of the Pan American Health Organization. While we did encounter some minor challenges related to the virtual conduct of this meeting, I am extremely satisfied and very pleased that you brought your boldest and most creative ideas to bear on our deliberations—I had requested this of you in my opening remarks. You ensured that a spirit of solidarity, and a focus on pro-equity considerations remained central to our policy recommendations as we recover and rebuild from this unprecedented catastrophe of our lifetime.

During this meeting you reiterated the need to prioritize equity, not only in relation to actions in health, but also regarding those societal actions required for advancing the well-being of all people. Additionally, I heard a clarion call over and over for greater cooperation and information sharing; for a union of forces to beat this pandemic, and we were reminded of your government's endeavors in this pandemic to make Health in All Policies a reality.

Distinguished Delegates, you once again emphasized the need to strengthen health systems to be more resilient and responsive to public health emergencies—emergencies such as this COVID-19 pandemic—but I was particularly heartened that you explicitly acknowledged the need for greater investments in health systems, including the essential public health functions and health in general. We must ensure that becomes a reality.

You expressed immense gratitude to all health workers for their unstinting dedication, their persistence—in the light of so many obstacles, and the sacrifices which some of them made, even with their lives, as they managed what was an overwhelming, and continues to be, an overwhelming COVID-19 case-loads in the face of extensive shortages of PPEs—still continuing to be, therapeutics, and other health technology. I want to join with you today once again in saluting all of our healthcare workers.

You have recognized and fully supported the need for innovation, including the use of artificial intelligence and other health technologies to advance data science in public health to enable the development of robust evidence-based health policies.

You have painfully recalled those national and regional challenges which negatively impacted your pandemic responses, including global supply chain failures, inequities in availability and distribution of essential supplies, limited or no regional production capacity, inadequate regulatory and support systems, all of which culminated in the deepening of the vulnerability of this Region. Against this background, we have come to recognize the strategic importance of this policy on self-sufficiency, which would enable increased national and regional production and increase access to vaccines—but not only vaccines—to essential medicines, and health technology. In this regard, the Secretariat has taken note of your emphasis on the importance of South-South, triangular and multilateral cooperation, particularly with entities such as the WHO, the World Trade Organization, and key private sector stakeholders.

I appreciate that Member States have recognized the potential public health threats that can be precipitated by actions at the human, animal, and environmental interfaces, and have unanimously supported the One Health comprehensive multisectoral, multi stakeholder approach.

Together we lamented the general decline in vaccination coverage in the Americas with increasing levels of vaccine hesitancy, all of which have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. I really implore your genuine attention to expand coverage, improve vaccine outreach programs, invest in the first level of care, and to address the issue of vaccine hesitancy. This is actually preventing us from exiting COVID-19, but beyond this, this will also affect all vaccination programs going well into the future.

Though the critical issue of Assessed Contributions was highlighted as a real challenge for Member States, particularly those experiencing negative economic impacts as a result of this pandemic, the absolute necessity for predictable flexible funding for the Secretariat in order to be able to execute its technical cooperation with Member States was also underscored. Once again, permit me to publicly applaud those Member States that have already remitted their Assessed Contributions, and I wish to appeal to the others to please meet your financial obligations to the Organization.

Your indefatigable spirit and determination allowed you to discuss and adopt no less than the thirteen resolutions that were proposed.

Also, two critical side events were convened, one on Technology Transfer for Production of mRNA vaccines and the other on a Comprehensive Response for Tackling the Prolonged Crisis resulting from the COVID-19 Pandemic. Those were both critical side events.

You will be happy to hear that the daily average of persons connected to this forum for the first three days was 2,533—in two days exceeding 3,000. The Region has been listening, and the world has been listening to us, as we deliberated on some of the real priority issues for this time—but also for ensuring that we can deliver on rights, and we can move to health and well-being, and advance on our way towards the Sustainable Development Goals.

As we continue the fight during the COVID-19 pandemic, today—on the basis of your deliberations—today I am very confident that together, unified in the spirit of Pan American solidarity, we will vanquish this SARS-CoV-2 and be much better prepared in real terms for the next pandemic, having taken on board and to heart the lessons learned in this chapter of public health. Our people as well as history will demand that we learn from this experience.

In this regard we welcome the commitments made by all major players two days ago at the US-led Global COVID-19 Summit, with the objective of meeting the goal of vaccinating at least 70% of all people all countries by the end of 2022. Significant investments will be made by the US and the European Union—and other countries have stated their commitment to meeting this goal.

In closing, and on behalf of all of us, I would like to convey our special thanks and deep appreciation to our President—Honorable Dr. Christopher Tufton, Minister of Health and Wellness of Jamaica. You will agree with me that his hand was steady, and he displayed skillful management of this 59th Directing Council. Thank you Dr. Tufton.

I would also like to express our sincerest gratitude to the President of the Executive Committee, the Vice President of this Directing Council—the Vice President of Ecuador, as well as our Rapporteur, who all discharged their respective functions with diligence and excellence.

I also wish to record our genuine and collective thanks to our own Deputy Director, Ms. Mary Lou Valdez, for her dedicated and effortlessly gracious work as Secretary of this Directing Council; to our Governing Bodies Office for their efficient planning, management, and execution of all matters related to this our second virtual Directing Council meeting—and I want to make special mention to Mônica Zaccarelli Davoli; to the staff of our Departments of Communications and Information Technology for all of their dynamic support with enabling effective and uninterrupted connectivity. And let me greet the other members of our Executive Management and to thank them, Legal Counsel, and all of our staff at the Secretariat, for their tireless efforts, their sterling contributions, and their magnanimous support—both during and prior to this week’s meeting. I also would like to thank all delegates for the meeting who were so diligent and active in their participation.

On behalf of all of the delegates, I want to extend a whole-hearted thank-you to our talented interpreters, without whom we would not have been able to conduct our work in such an efficient and seamless manner—we would have been in a situation like the Tower of Babel.

Ladies and gentlemen, once again, I congratulate and thank you all for a job well-done and I do look forward to your continued unstinting support, active engagement and unwavering solidarity with the Pan American Sanitary Bureau as we continue to work to save lives and improve the health and well-being of all peoples, while fighting this monumental battle against this miniscule COVID-19 virus. A tiny particle can cause so much pain and suffering in the world, but I am convinced together that we will overcome.

Thank you all very much and goodbye.
