

PAN AMERICAN HEALTH ORGANIZATION (PAHO)
Addressing the Challenges of the COVID-19 Pandemic for the Region of the Americas
Highlights of PAHO Technical Cooperation January – March 2022
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More than two years after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Region of the Americas continues to be its epicenter. In February 2022, COVID-19 morbidity was still higher in the Americas than in any other WHO region, resulting in the loss of 2.7 million people in the Americas by March 2022. The Region also continues to account for a disproportionate number of COVID-19 infections. While the Americas make up 13% of the global population, it has reported 30.6% of total cases worldwide and 43.8% of deaths.¹ At the same time, vaccination against the SARS-CoV-2 virus has been uneven. By March 2022, 66.5% of the population in Latin America and the Caribbean had been vaccinated against COVID-19 with at least two doses, and 14 countries and territories had immunized 70% of their populations. However, another 14 countries had yet to reach 40% coverage.²

Accelerate equitable access to COVID-19 vaccinations

Narrowing COVID-19 vaccination gaps between and within countries

Many countries are still well below the WHO target of 70% vaccination coverage by 30 June 2022, among them Guatemala (32.9% as of 7 April 2022) and Honduras (45.5%). Serious imbalances in vaccination rates also persist within nations. In low-income countries, on average 54% of the population had yet to receive a single dose of COVID-19 vaccine as of February 2022.³

In 2022, PAHO is working to narrow the vaccination gaps within and between countries. PAHO has started (1) focusing technical assistance and training in vaccine operations on the 19 countries with lower vaccination rates; and (2) directing assistance to ensure 70% vaccine coverage among priority groups, namely health and essential workers, older people, immunocompromised people, people with comorbidities, and pregnant women.

Strengthening cold chains

Cold chain operations include rules, procedures, and refrigeration equipment to safely and properly store and distribute COVID-19 vaccines, and require effective management for successful execution of different tasks to support vaccination activities. PAHO is focusing technical assistance and training for countries with insufficient and/or inadequate cold chain capacity to accommodate all types of COVID-19 vaccines.

¹ Statistics drawn from data on PAHO's COVID-19 webpages: <https://www.paho.org/en/topics/coronavirus-infections/coronavirus-disease-covid-19-pandemic>

² Statistics drawn from PAHO's COVID-19 Vaccination in the Americas webpage: https://ais.paho.org/imm/IM_DosisAdmin-Vacunacion.asp

³ Statistics drawn from PAHO's COVID-19 Vaccination in the Americas webpage: https://ais.paho.org/imm/IM_DoIsAdmin-Vacunacion.asp

In 2022, PAHO began purchasing cold chain equipment to update existing refrigeration equipment; extend cold chain operations to remote or isolated areas; and fill gaps in cold chain operations. PAHO also initiated the process of training national technical personnel in the storage and handling of all types of COVID-19 vaccines and in medical waste management.

Increasing COVID-19 vaccine uptake by reducing hesitancy

Vaccine hesitancy has grown significantly in many countries, especially in parts of the English-speaking Caribbean. Reasons include misinformation and disinformation, political and religious factors, and perception of the COVID-19 disease as low risk. Doubts about the safety of vaccines have further eroded trust. In response, PAHO is developing a multifaceted strategy to use information and communication strategies to counteract vaccine hesitancy. Support is being directed at ten Latin American countries and the English-speaking Caribbean countries.

In early 2022, PAHO strengthened its work on addressing vaccine misinformation and disinformation in the Caribbean, while enhancing communication strategies to promote vaccines. PAHO will also assist countries with crisis and risk communications, community engagement, and outreach to influencers of all age groups and affiliations. PAHO is also working to strengthen data generation on vaccine safety to inform risk and crisis communication campaigns to improve vaccine confidence and uptake.

Inclusive and accessible vaccine services to reach people with disabilities

Some evidence suggests that lower vaccination rates are found among the estimated 82-98 million people in Latin America and the Caribbean who live with disabilities. To address these inequalities, PAHO is adapting COVID-19 vaccine materials into various formats accessible to people with different communication requirements. This includes developing sign language and captioned videos for people who are hearing impaired, easy-to-read materials for people with cognitive or intellectual disabilities, and large print, alternative text and braille materials for people who are blind or sight impaired. In total, PAHO expects to adapt and disseminate ten vaccine materials for the disability community across the Region.

Improving vaccine confidence by providing data on vaccine safety

Severe adverse event or events associated with COVID-19 vaccination could ignite a public health crisis and undermine public confidence in the vaccines. As such, surveillance of Events Supposedly Attributable to Vaccination or Immunization (ESAVI) and continuous review of the safety of COVID-19 vaccines are vital to confidence in and uptake of vaccines.

PAHO built a regional surveillance system for ESAVI. By March 31, 2022, 16 countries were sharing their national ESAVI databases with serious and non-serious ESAVI. PAHO has also built a regional network of sentinel hospitals for active surveillance of serious ESAVI to allow for timely alerts on safety issues, e.g., quality deviations of COVID-19 vaccines or ESAVI related to immunization or vaccination process. By the

end of the first quarter 2022, 18 sentinel hospitals in eight countries were contributing to this active surveillance.

Scaling up regional manufacturing to increase access to COVID-19 vaccines

In response to the shortage of COVID-19 vaccines produced in Latin America and the Caribbean, PAHO in August 2021 launched the Regional Platform to Advance the Manufacturing of COVID-19 Vaccines and other Health Technologies in the Americas. The platform convenes public and private stakeholders to incentivize regional development and manufacturing of essential health technologies with a goal to broaden regional access to such products.

In 2022, PAHO is advancing the initiative to include improving access to strategic information to guide R&D and product development and reduce regional vulnerability during public health emergencies. PAHO also expects to improve access to safe personal protective equipment and increase response capacity and coordination through the Regional Platform.

PAHO, WHO, and the Medicines Patent Pool collaborated on the first in-person training session for Latin American vaccine scientists, held March 7-9, 2022, at Afrigen Biologics and Vaccines in South Africa. Scientists from Sinergium Biotech and Instituto Tecnológico Bio-Manguinhos learned about Afrigen's manufacturing processes, including formulation of lipid nanoparticles and vaccine production and control using mRNA technology.

Stockpiling ancillary vaccine supplies to facilitate immunization programs

The PAHO Revolving Fund is procuring and stockpiling essential ancillary vaccine supplies for Latin American and Caribbean countries. Based on projected country needs, the Revolving Fund is in the first stages of procuring supplies for storage in PAHO's regional distribution warehouse in Panama to help reduce delivery time in cases of emergencies or sudden depletion of inventories.

The Revolving Fund is in the initial stages of procuring eco-friendly equipment to improve management of waste from health care facilities, which has increased during the pandemic. Potential target countries include El Salvador, Guyana, Jamaica, Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala, and Haiti.

Digital certificates of COVID-19 vaccination status to improve continuing care

PAHO is providing technical assistance to Member States to develop digital COVID-19 vaccine certification. The vaccine certificates, which can be stored on digital devices with QR codes, provide patients' immunization status, including the number of doses received and their vaccination schedule. PAHO is providing technical guidance for development, installation, and use of digital vaccine certificates in Dominica, El Salvador, Ecuador, Honduras, and Uruguay. PAHO is also providing technical guidance addressing complex ethical issues raised by digital vaccine certificates, including patient confidentiality, privacy laws, and data protection.