



60th DIRECTING COUNCIL

75th SESSION OF THE REGIONAL COMMITTEE OF WHO FOR THE AMERICAS

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**OPENING REMARKS BY THE OUTGOING PRESIDENT OF THE PAHO DIRECTING COUNCIL,
HON. DR. CHRISTOPHER TUFTON,
MINISTER OF HEALTH AND WELLNESS OF JAMAICA**

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75th Session of the Regional Committee of WHO for the Americas**

Dr. Jarbas Barbosa Da Silva, Director of the Pan American Sanitary Bureau
Hon. Xavier Becerra, Secretary of Health and Human Services of the United States of America
Hon. Mr. Ilan Goldfajn, President of the Inter-American Development Bank
Hon. Ms. Maricarmen Plata, Secretary for Access to Rights and Equity
of the Organization of American States
Hon. Dr. Catharina Cora Boehme, Assistant Director-General for External Relations and
Governance of the World Health Organization
Ms. Mary Lou Valdez, Deputy Director of the Pan American Sanitary Bureau
Esteemed ladies and gentlemen

A very good morning to you all.

I take the opportunity to welcome you to this the 60th Directing Council of the Pan American Health Organization—an unrivaled space to advance the work of public health in the interest of the people of the Region of the Americas.

We, in fact, gather at a critical time, when there are significant challenges facing the Region—and in particular Caribbean small-island developing states (SIDS). These are challenges that demand scaled-up, collaborative, and sustained actions, and across a range of areas, involving diverse stakeholders—including those of us present in this room.

I believe, ladies and gentlemen, that we are up to the task, with a demonstrated commitment to safeguarding the health of the Region’s people and a track record of partnerships that have served the public good—incentivized by our individual and collective preoccupation with and prioritization of the changing sick profile of our respective populations.

The lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic are many. Not the least of these is the need to plan better for pandemic influenza preparedness. We have in the Pandemic Influenza Preparedness Framework: Partnership Contribution High-Level Implementation Plan III, 2024–2030 an important tool.

Still, I hasten to add that special consideration must be given to SIDS and their particular circumstances—from high debt burdens to their small size and, therefore, compromised capacities to respond effectively, without support, in a pandemic.

This reality, together with other prevailing stressors, including the sobering reality of climate change risks and threats, means that Caribbean SIDS must have the benefit of special consideration and provisions that are enabling to their enhanced resilience.

The situation is made even more urgent by the fact of a ballooning NCDs epidemic facing not only Caribbean SIDS but the entire Region of the Americas.

As reflected in the recent 2023 Bridgetown Declaration on NCDs and Mental Health, COVID-19 has “highlighted the link between health and development and exposed health system vulnerabilities for people living with NCDs and mental health conditions in SIDS.” Further, “the presence of NCDs and their risk factors increased the severity and mortality rates for COVID-19 patients,” with NCD screening, management, and treatment as well as mental health services “severely disrupted during the pandemic.”

Not only does this underscore the need for special consideration and enhanced provisioning for SIDS, it also makes the case for attention to the behavioral sciences as an important part of our response to the varied challenges with which we are now faced—from the mammoth NCDs problem to the ongoing pandemic recovery and climate change, together with the prospect of future pandemics, which is always a clear and potential danger.

The fact is that the use of traditional approaches and in particular the emphasis on clinical interventions, has not yielded the kind of results we need. The more than 70% of people who die annually in Jamaica, for example, as a consequence of NCDs—as in other SIDS, the Region of the Americas and globally—is evidence of this. I wish, therefore, to champion a concerted effort toward a human-centered health ecosystem approach, which gives attention to the range of factors that influence people’s behavior.

I pause here to commend the efforts of the PAHO/WHO for the development of the concept paper, “Strategic Communications in Public Health for Behavior Change.” We must accelerate progress on work in this area, building on developments from earlier years, including the Strategic Plan of the Pan American Health Organization 2020–2025 and the Strategy and Plan of Action on Knowledge Management and Communications.

We require a new social and behavioral framework for action in public health, one that is culturally appropriate and equity-focused with social variables such as age, gender, education level as cross-cutting priorities. It should include provisions for, among other things, Big Data analytics, online social behavior, infodemic management, and digital literacy.

Ladies and gentlemen, a necessary part of the public health response to existing and emergent challenges must be social and behavioral science strategies, in support of better decision-making for health among our populations.

To succeed, we must prioritize human resources for health that are not only sufficient in number but also in competencies to serve our populations; and to prevail over the challenges.

We must develop the capacities of public health workers even as we expand their numbers globally. One of the things that COVID-19 has taught us and which is reinforced by the ballooning NCDs problem is that we not only need all hands on deck, but also more hands on deck—additional ‘hands’ that we have to recruit and to train so that in the routine operation of our public health systems and in a crisis, we are able to meet our human resource needs.

To make it happen, however, requires deliberate actions and innovation that includes working through collaborative approaches that serve both patients and providers and individual Member States as well as the Region.

In conclusion, each of us here, together with our ‘supporting cast’ back home, carry the burden of responsibility to safeguard the health of our populations. Yes, there are a great many challenges in public health, none of which can be solved overnight.

However, working together while giving space for the full ventilation and consideration of our particular needs and how they can be addressed has served us well. The meeting of the Directing Council is and has been a safe, productive space for this kind of engagement.

It is a fact that unless all of us are safe, none of us are safe. This was clearly in evidence during the COVID-19 pandemic. I, therefore, look forward to collaboratively advancing the program of work in the coming days, toward the good health and wellness of the people of the Region of the Americas.

I take this opportunity also to say that it has been my pleasure to serve as president and commit to making continued best efforts in service to Caribbean SIDs and the entire Region of the Americas.

Thank you.

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