



## **60th DIRECTING COUNCIL**

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

*Washington, D.C., USA, 25–29 September 2023*

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**CLOSING REMARKS BY DR. JARBAS BARBOSA DA SILVA JR.,  
DIRECTOR OF THE PAN AMERICAN SANITARY BUREAU  
AND REGIONAL DIRECTOR OF THE WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION FOR THE AMERICAS**

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**28 September 2023**

**60th Directing Council  
75th Session of the WHO Regional Committee for the Americas**

Mme. President of the 60th Directing Council, Honorable Dr. Ivette Berrío Aquí, Vice-minister of Panama  
Vice-president of the 60th Directing Council, Honorable Dr. Rakesh Sukul, Director of Health of Suriname  
Other distinguished members of the head table  
Mr. Tufton, Outgoing President of the Executive Committee; again thank you for all your support during this period  
Honorable Ministers and Secretaries of Health of PAHO Member States  
Distinguished Member States and Delegates  
Eminent Members of the Diplomatic Corps  
Representatives of Non-Governmental Organizations in official relations with the Pan American Health Organization  
Fellow PAHO and WHO colleagues  
Honored guests  
Esteemed ladies and gentlemen

A very good afternoon, almost good evening, to you all.

It is with a wonderful sense of fulfillment that I am standing with you this afternoon to end this 60th Directing Council of the Pan American Health Organization. Another reason to celebrate is that we are back in our main building after the recent and much needed renovations.

During these past four days, you have successfully navigated through 41 agenda items; reviewed eight progress reports; five final reports; and approved 12 resolutions. So congratulations, you really did an excellent job.

We have now come to the end of a highly productive and engaging week and, on behalf of the entire Secretariat and on my own behalf, I wish to extend my sincerest thanks and heartfelt appreciation to you all for your individual and collective contributions to delivering on this week's extensive tasks.

When you, our Member States, provide critical analyses of proposed policies, strategies, and plans of action and evidence-based guidance and direction to the Secretariat with the level of dedication and thoroughness that you displayed this week, you are ensuring both the quality and the relevance of PAHO's technical cooperation programs both now and well into the future.

Ladies and gentlemen, I would like to take a few moments to briefly recapture a few highlights of this week's deliberations.

We have emerged from the COVID-19 pandemic, and while we cannot let our guard down, we need to take this as an opportunity to accelerate the actions to recuperate lost public health gains and increase resilience in our health systems. It is vital that Member States continue to actively participate in the discussions regarding the revision of the International Health Regulations and the Intergovernmental Negotiation Body in WHO.

During this week you discussed and approved key resolutions related to policies to strengthen health workforce and NCDs in children, adolescents, and young adults; a strategy for improving mental health and suicide prevention; as well as a concept paper on strategic communication in public health for behavior change. We have also come to agreement on issues related to the PAHO Proposed Program Budget for 2024–2025 and the Scale of the Assessed Contributions for 2024–2025 and other relevant administrative matters.

Strengthening human resources for health will remain key in a post-pandemic era and essential to building resilient health systems of the future. The health crisis has once again highlighted the chronic shortfall and poor distribution of human resources in the Region and the lack of policies, strategic planning processes, and sufficient investment in the production, training, and professional development of a fit-for-purpose health workforce, including measures to protect the well-being of health workers. The pandemic has also exposed the limitations of many information systems in terms of data on the availability and distribution of health care professionals at different levels of care, disaggregation by professional categories, and the composition and characteristics of interprofessional health teams.

Noncommunicable diseases continue to be the main cause of poor health, disability, and death in the Region of the Americas and represent 81% of general mortality. The Region is still experiencing important deficiencies in the mental health services and the pandemic has created, in addition, a mental health crisis as a result of the increase in the demand and the inability of the services in order to respond. Our Region is the most affected of all WHO's regions in terms of suicide rates. So, there is much to be done.

Access to information is essential, it is important to consider that behaviors respond to established social constructs and that, therefore, addressing the underlying living conditions of those receiving the information is essential to effect behavior change. Behavior is influenced by where people live and by their access to resources, educational level, and type of employment, among other factors. Therefore, effectively changing behavior requires promoting structural changes through policies that improve living conditions and environments conducive to making healthy choices.

Let me now switch to Spanish.

Four briefings were held: one on the application of lessons from COVID-19 in pandemic prevention, preparedness, and response, and the Secretariat's plan for action on the recommendations of the external evaluation report, which is the first external evaluation of the COVID-19 response among all World Health Organization regions, representing a significant milestone for PAHO and the global public health community.

Another of the briefings was on communicable diseases in the Americas (the Accelerating the Elimination initiative), where we heard about significant progress toward eliminating communicable diseases in the Region, including malaria, mother-to-child transmission of HIV and congenital syphilis, onchocerciasis, foot-and-mouth disease, and other neglected diseases, as well as cervical cancer. PAHO's elimination initiative has been a driving force for more integrated, effective, efficient, and equitable health services in the Americas to accelerate the elimination of multiple diseases.

We also had a session on the inclusion of noncommunicable diseases in primary health care, with concrete actions in countries aimed at making the first level of care transformative and decisive, producing changes in behavior, achieving holistic prevention of risk factors, and organizing community teams that strengthen elements of health promotion, disease prevention, and simple changes in public health policies.

The final session was on the progress of the health equity agenda in the Region today, where progress towards equity has clearly been limited and slow. With approximately six years until the conclusion of the commitments to the Sustainable Development Goals, we need more urgent action to reduce health inequities.

You carefully reviewed progress reports and final reports on a number of strategies and plans of action that are still in implementation or that have already been completed. We all agree that, while we continue to build on our collective successes, much remains to be done to address persistent challenges.

I wish to convey special thanks and deep appreciation to our President, the Honorable Vice-minister Dr. Ivette Berrío Aquí, of Panama, and to our Vice-president, Dr. Rakesh Sukul, of Suriname, for the firmness and great efficiency with which they have presided over this 60th PAHO Directing Council. Thanks to both, we stayed on course and completed the week's agenda with respect, courtesy, and sensitivity. I would also like to express our sincere appreciation to the President of the Executive Committee, the Honorable Minister Christopher Tufton of Jamaica, and to our Rapporteur, Dr. Melissa Musa, Director of Public Health and Welfare of Belize.

I also wish to thank our Deputy Director, Mary Lou Valdez, for her dedicated work as Secretary of the Directing Council, as well as our entire staff, including the Governing Bodies Office, with special thanks to the head of that office, Nicolás Lagomarsino, for his tireless efforts and excellent contributions both during this week's meeting and in the many preceding weeks of preparation. I would also like to express my sincere thanks to our interpreters, without whom we

would not be able to carry out our work so smoothly, and also to our translators, who have made it possible for the members of the Committee to have all this meeting's documents in their languages.

Today, as we wrap up, I would like to respectfully ask that we recommit to the Pan American values of equity, excellence, solidarity, respect, and integrity. Once again, I congratulate you all on a job well done. Have a good trip back to your respective homes.

Thank you all very much.

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