
REMARKS PAHO DIRECTOR DR. JARBAS BARBOSA APRIL 18 2024

Washington, DC

Good morning to everyone joining us. Today, we are here to celebrate the 22nd version of Vaccination Week in the Americas. Every year, in April, more than 40 countries and territories in the Americas come together to vaccinate their populations, making a special effort to reach people who may not have regular access to health services, including indigenous peoples, migrants, border populations and those living on the urban fringe.

As the flagship initiative of our Organization for more than 20 years, Vaccination Week has been instrumental in reaching over 1.15 billion individuals across our Region with life-saving vaccines.

This year, Vaccination Week will be celebrated between the 20th and the 27th of April with the slogan “Engage now to protect your future #GetVax”. This year’s campaign will focus on the protection afforded by vaccines as a crucial part of ensuring an active life. Our countries will aim to reach more than 83.5 million people with almost 156 million doses.

Historically, our Region has always been a leader in disease elimination. However, for more than a decade, vaccination coverages have significantly decreased due to several factors, including the false perception that eliminated and controlled diseases no longer pose a risk to people’s health; a reduction in the prioritization of vaccination programs; health services not adapting their vaccination offer to current demands and lifestyles in a way that has impeded access; a lack of training for health professionals in topics such as vaccine effectiveness and safety; and the rise of disinformation and antivaccine sentiment, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic.

Thanks to the tremendous efforts made by countries over the past few years, we have been able to recover our coverage rates to pre-pandemic levels, for example reaching a coverage of 91% for the first dose of the diphtheria, tetanus, and pertussis vaccine. Results like this are encouraging on our path to recovery.

Despite improvements, in 2022, 1.2 million children younger than 1 year had never received a vaccine dose. And two million children younger than the age of 1 – that is, 15 out of every 100 children – remain only partially protected against vaccine-preventable diseases in the region.

Furthermore, we have not yet reached our pre-pandemic levels of coverage with measles-containing vaccines. This is very concerning, given the rise in measles cases around the globe and the highly contagious nature of this virus. We also remain far from the 90% vaccination coverage rate we want to reach for girls ages 9 to 14 against the Human Papilloma Virus (HPV), which affords them lifelong protection against cervical cancer, one of the main causes of death among women.

While we work towards recovery, we continue to face some persistent challenges to our immunization programs. To overcome these we need:

- **Commitment:** The same political commitment to COVID-19 vaccination must be applied to routine immunization programs.
- **Resources:** Increase financial and technical resources to improve the performance of essential vaccination services, eliminate barriers to access and ensure that every person can exercise their right to vaccination.
- **Vaccine acceptance:** Establish effective communication strategies that respond to the need for more information about vaccination, and tackle antivaccine movements that disseminate false information.

PAHO will continue to support immunization efforts in the countries and territories of the Americas.

PAHO's regional vaccine procurement mechanism – the Revolving Fund for Access to Vaccines, which has provided countries with 130 million doses of vaccines in 2022 and 2023 – will continue to ensure access to safe and quality vaccines at affordable prices for our region. The Fund currently offers 76 products, including vaccines against polio, measles, influenza and HPV, as well as syringes and cold chain equipment. Also, PAHO's special program, innovation and regional production platform continues to support the regional manufacturing of vaccines, which will not only benefit countries of the Americas during emergencies but will help to improve access to vaccines for regular programs.

Our end-goal remains to support countries as they strengthen disease surveillance, increase vaccination coverage rates in all corners of their national territory and avoid outbreaks of vaccine-preventable diseases.

Finally, I would like to call on the public to trust in, advocate for, and support vaccines. For more than two centuries now, we have enjoyed the benefits of vaccines. We have been able to live happier, healthier, longer, and more active lives, while minimizing the threat of vaccine-preventable diseases. This has only been possible thanks to the trust we have placed in our immunization programs, and we cannot be complacent. Vaccines keep us and our loved ones protected against more than 20 diseases and must continue performing their key role in our societies.

So please, engage now and protect your future. Get yourself and your loved ones vaccinated.

THANK YOU.

Dr. Jarbas Barbosa