

CD61/DIV/2

Original: English/Spanish

**WELCOMING 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**

30 September 2024

Honorable Dr. Fernando Boyd Galindo, Minister of Health of Panama, Outgoing President of the 60th Directing Council;

Honorable Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director-General of the World Health Organization;

Honorable Ms. Loyce Pace, Assistant Secretary for Global Affairs of the United States Department of Health and Human Services;

Honorable Mr. Luis Almagro Lemes, Secretary General of the Organization of American States;

Honorable Mr. Pablo Ibararán, Social Protection and Health Division Chief of the Inter-American Development Bank;

Distinguished members of this Directing Council, excellencies, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen, welcome.

A special thanks to the esteemed ministers of health from across our Region who were able to join us in person today.

It is an honor to be here, surrounded by so many valued colleagues and partners who I have had the privilege of working with over the years. Your trusted partnership remains a source of pride and strength for this Organization.

Let me begin by expressing my solidarity with the people of the countries affected by Hurricane Beryl.

Hurricane Beryl raged through the Caribbean this past July, leaving behind serious damage in Grenada, Jamaica, and St. Vincent and the Grenadines. We know that climate threats like hurricanes can severely damage health systems, especially in vulnerable communities, making it even more difficult to treat the people affected by these emergencies.

The Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) has stood and will continue to stand with you to restore services, build resilient health systems, and protect the health of your communities.

This collective support is the foundation of our work over the past century.

Today we start the 61st Directing Council and throughout the week we will be discussing eight technical matters: the Strategy and Plan of Action to Decrease the Burden of Sepsis through an Integrated Approach 2025–2029; the Policy for Strengthening Equity-Oriented Health Sector Action on Climate Change and Health; the Plan of Action for Strengthening Information Systems for Health 2024–2030; the Policy on Long-term Care; the Strategy for Strengthening the Essential Public Health Functions to Accelerate Health Systems Transformation 2024–2034; the Strategy and Plan of Action to Strengthen Tobacco Control in the Region of the Americas 2025–2030; the Strategy on Integrated Emergency, Critical and Operative Care 2025–2030; and, the Strategy on Epidemic Intelligence for Strengthening Early Warning of Health Emergencies 2024–2029. We will also review the Report of the End-of-biennium Assessment of the PAHO Program Budget 2022–2023/Second Interim Report on the Implementation of the PAHO Strategic Plan 2020–2025, five final reports, and three progress reports on different technical matters.

This November marks the 100th anniversary of the Pan American Sanitary Code, ratified at the 7th Pan American Sanitary Conference in Havana, Cuba. The Code was set out to prevent the spread of communicable diseases, encourage information sharing among countries, and standardize health approaches to prevent disease transmission across borders.

A hundred years later, these themes still resonate. Member States are now finalizing the negotiation of a new Pandemic Accord, building on these pillars to protect against future global disease outbreaks. In May this year during the World Health Assembly, Member States agreed on amendments to the International Health Regulations to better prepare the world for future events of public health concern. Noting the crucial importance of the meaningful participation of our Member States in the Pandemic Accord negotiations, PAHO convened four face-to-face regional meetings that have enabled our countries to better understand its national and regional implications and to agree on more than 16 joint statements on key issues. The Pan American Sanitary Bureau (the Bureau) has prioritized its support for voluntary external evaluations of their International Health Regulations core capacities in the Caribbean, Central America, and South America, in order to identify priority interventions. And recognizing the need for additional financial resources, the Bureau has supported the mobilization of financial resources for epidemic surveillance, laboratory capacity, and the emergency workforce through successful proposals from the first round of the Pandemic Fund and additional resources may be soon available from the second round. These will be announced in the next few days.

The COVID-19 pandemic revealed Latin America and the Caribbean's structural dependence on imported vaccines and other health technologies, the geographic concentration of innovation and production capacities, and vulnerable global supply chains. In response, in 2021 our 59th Directing Council made a commitment to increasing production capacity for essential medicines and health technologies. In 2023, we created the Innovation and Regional Production Platform for medicines and health technologies which will work in hand with our Regional Revolving Funds to promote the generation of regional ecosystems and initiatives to strengthen capacities for innovation, development, and production of health technologies, as well as facilitating technology transfer and boosting the capacity to develop and produce mRNA vaccines in Brazil and Argentina to serve all of our Region. With technical support from PAHO and funds donated by the government of the United States of America, El Salvador's national regulatory authority recently inaugurated a center for the

quality control of personal protective equipment, which will serve as a sub-regional hub to assess the quality of particle respirators, masks, and gloves, among other products. The hub is part of a PAHO project aimed at strengthening the capacity to produce essential health technologies following the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as reducing external dependence on these products, which are mostly produced outside the Region. A similar initiative is in the final stages of implementation at the Colombian national regulatory authority (INVIMA), which will serve as a quality control hub for South American countries.

The Pan American Health Organization is in advanced negotiations with Pfizer to localize and provide early access to one of the most advanced vaccines in Pfizer's pipeline. This potential localization involves a local manufacturer based in Latin America, with which Pfizer already has a relationship. This initiative is a concrete example of PAHO's effort to leverage the Revolving Fund to strengthen the regional production of vaccines and build the capacity to foster and develop pandemic preparedness in the Region.

Last year, PAHO relaunched its Elimination Initiative—an effort to eliminate more than 30 communicable diseases and related conditions in the Americas by 2030. These diseases affect the poorest among us. They feed the vicious generational cycle of poverty and disease: families who cannot afford preventive care are the most vulnerable to falling ill, and the least able to afford treatment. Ending these diseases is our clearest path to reducing poverty and inequality in the Region. To date, 19 countries have eliminated malaria and 11, mainly in the Caribbean, have eliminated mother-to-child transmission of HIV and congenital syphilis. On this note, I congratulate Brazil for the elimination of lymphatic filariasis as a public health problem. I am proud of these advances in our Region and PAHO is committed to accelerating these efforts with you.

In the last two years, countries in the Region managed to halt the decline in routine vaccination coverage and even achieved an increase for most antigens, reaching 88% regional coverage for the third dose of DPT in 2023. However, progress is still below our 95% target, indicating that our efforts need to be strengthened. In addition, there are 22 countries in the Region that have not managed to bring their coverage back to pre-pandemic level. This situation, coupled with surveillance systems and outbreak response capacity that are not ideal, puts at risk the elimination gains we have made so far. Likewise, despite the fact that only three countries are pending introduction of the vaccine against the human papillomavirus, a great challenge remains in terms of improving coverage, which at the regional level stands at 77% for the first dose at age 15, which is still far from the 90% minimum coverage needed to facilitate the elimination of cervical cancer. It is imperative that we continue to work towards a full recovery of these immunization coverages in our Region.

It is an honor to highlight the strong and ongoing collaboration between PAHO and the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) on Information Systems for Health (IS4H) and Digital Health, a partnership that reflects our shared commitment to advancing public health in the Region. Together, we are actively working with 20 countries, supported by IDB loans exceeding US\$ 900 million, all aligned with the IS4H Framework. This strategic approach is driving a transformation in the way information systems and digital health are managed and utilized, ensuring improved health outcomes for millions. Additionally, critical projects such as the Pan American Highway for Digital Health, Telehealth, Artificial Intelligence, Cybersecurity,

Cross-Border Interoperability, and Digital Vaccine Certificates, among others, are leading a revolution in public health. We are also pleased to announce that the World Bank has recently joined these efforts, with over US\$ 200 million in loans already in place under the same framework. This united collaboration exemplifies our collective determination to strengthen health systems, improve access to care, and ensure no one is left behind in the Americas. I am also glad to inform you that this month, we will release the first-ever Regional Report on the Maturity Level of IS4H, with comprehensive data from all countries and territories in the Americas. This report will establish an evidence-based baseline that enables all partners to join forces with one common goal: that of supporting our Member States in building more resilient and equitable health systems.

At the core of all these initiatives is primary care: the backbone of all health systems. Primary care is an instrument for equity, our first line of defense against outbreaks, our best investment to improve health indicators.

The Alliance for Primary Health Care in the Americas, launched in December last year in Uruguay, is a major step forward for our Region. This strategic collaboration between the World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), and PAHO has created a united vision for primary care that increases access to health services and strengthens health systems. In the Dominican Republic, for example, new investments by the World Bank and the IDB are directed towards maternal health, digital health, and the control of noncommunicable diseases under a new collaboration and coordination mechanism called the Alliance Commission. The Alliance supports similar initiatives in the 10 countries that have requested support through this innovative mechanism.

Primary health care will help us address the serious challenges facing the Region, including noncommunicable diseases, which account for 81% of deaths in the Americas, 35% of which are premature and preventable. This represents a significant cost for families and the socioeconomic development of countries, widening inequality gaps.

The Pan American Health Organization is committed to supporting Member States in this essential effort. With the Better Care for Noncommunicable Diseases initiative, PAHO is committed to supporting countries in developing plans to improve the integration of services for these diseases, reach underserved groups with innovative medicines and technologies, and train health workers in the detection, diagnosis, and treatment of noncommunicable diseases. Cardiovascular diseases are the leading cause of death in our Region, claiming more than two million lives each year, more deaths than any other condition. Ministries of health coordinate the HEARTS initiative in the Americas with the collaboration of local stakeholders and technical support from PAHO and other partners such as Resolve to Save Lives and the World Hypertension League. To date, 33 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean have committed to implement HEARTS. In fact, eight countries are already implementing the program throughout their primary care network.

To better play our role, a year ago I launched the PAHO Forward initiative to review our operations so that we can better respond to the needs of Member States. The results of this first year are already visible.

- a) The delegation of authority to PAHO/WHO representatives in the countries has been increased to increase efficiency and streamline administrative processes.

- b) We have increased the efficiencies of the Regional Revolving Funds by improving their billing processes, monitoring of country balances, and preparation of financial statements for Member States.
- c) We have published reports on three external evaluations and increased the number of internal audits from eight to 12 per year.
- d) PAHO's Program and Budget Portal has been launched, allowing countries to monitor implementation of the Organization's budget in real time.
- e) The Green PAHO initiative has been implemented to determine the total gas emissions generated by all PAHO activities in the Region, a major step towards the sustainability of our Organization.

At the beginning of September 2024, we launched an updated version of PAHO Forward: 2.0. This plan will help us strengthen our support in the countries where our core work is carried out and where the most pressing needs are found.

We are allocating virtually all new financial and human resources at the country level so that we can provide direct technical support where it will have the greatest positive influence.

In addition to providing direct support to Member States, PAHO's role is to advocate for our Region. Too often, international organizations do not give priority to Latin America and the Caribbean in global discussions.

I firmly believe that, with the right resources and tools, our Region has the capacity to realize PAHO's vision of health equity throughout the Americas and achieve the goal of universal health care.

We have the opportunity to change the lives of millions of people. I pledge to use the full strength of our Organization to achieve the objectives and commitments that we will be making throughout this week.

This strength comes from each Member State, from each professional on our team, from each partner. Together we share a great ambition that drives us forward: the ambition to improve the health of all people in the Americas.

Muchas gracias. Thank you. Muito obrigado. Merci beaucoup.
