

PAHO Director reflects on momentous decade of championing universal health, calls for renewed attention to immunization at Pan American Sanitary Conference

Other health leaders emphasized lessons from COVID-19 and solidarity in shaping the future of health in the region, including preparedness for future emergencies.



Washington, DC, 26 September 2022 (PAHO) – At the opening of the 30th Pan American Sanitary Conference today, the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) Director Carissa F. Etienne acknowledged significant gains in health in the last decade but urged countries to address current challenges, including immunization gaps that have “rolled back nearly three decades of progress on childhood vaccinations in recent years.”

“Over the last decade, I’ve seen countries translate the idea of universal health care into practical policies”, the PAHO Director said, citing how local, regional, and national governments are working together to achieve “our shared agenda for health in the Americas and the Sustainable Development goals.”

PAHO was able to expand technical cooperation to increase health system resilience and disaster preparedness, which “proved instrumental in our

responses to Zika, COVID and monkeypox,” Dr. Etienne said.

While collaboration has had real impact in reducing inequality, Dr. Etienne said countries must continue in a spirit of solidarity to address current challenges, including falling immunization coverage.

Across the board, vaccination rates for preventable diseases have either stalled or moved backwards, the PAHO Director said, and the region now sees the circulation of diseases that “we had either already eliminated or were once on the verge of surpassing.”

The PAHO Director urged countries to reverse these trends with “unwavering resolve,” as “other diseases like diphtheria and yellow fever are just one outbreak away from becoming regional emergencies.”

The Director also called for greater cooperation towards universal health in the region, since during COVID-19 “the world recognized just how central health is to our societies and to our economies.”

“For 120 years, the Americas have relied on cooperation because we’ve understood that our health, our security and our prosperity are interdependent,” the Director said, referring to PAHO’s creation in 1902 to address a yellow fever emergency.

As we turn to the task of rebuilding from this pandemic, Dr. Etienne said, “we must do more to improve the health of our people by working in partnership.”

“I hope that 10 years from now, we can look at our region as one”, Dr. Etienne said, where countries recognize the ties that link the health of people, planet, and animals, and where “digital technologies enhance disease monitoring, improve the patient experience and encourage informed decision-making in all of our Member States.”

The 30th Pan American Sanitary Conference, held from 26-30 September 2022, kicked off today bringing together high-level dignitaries and health authorities from countries in the Americas to deliberate on policies to strengthen health.

During the week, delegates will discuss ongoing health emergencies, including COVID-19 and monkeypox, and review policies and strategies to strengthen the region’s preparedness for future outbreaks. This includes, among others, regional action to improve genomic surveillance, develop resilient health workforces and enhance regulatory systems to facilitate the manufacturing of health technologies, such as vaccines. Other issues, such as the growing

burden of mental health disorders, access to primary care and tackling non-communicable diseases, will also be addressed.

[The Pan American Sanitary Conference](#) is the Organization's highest decision-making body, meeting every five years to determine policies to improve the health and well-being of the population in the region.

During this year's Conference, Member and Participating States will elect the next PAHO Director, who will take office on 1 February 2023 and lead the Organization for the next five years.

Selected quotes from the opening session of the 30th Pan American Sanitary Conference:

Dr. Julio Borba, Minister of Public Health and Social Welfare of Paraguay, Outgoing President of the Pan American Sanitary Conference.

"We can affirm that this is a pandemic of inequalities, exacerbated especially in the health, economic and social spheres, in which inequities between and within countries have worsened. We must adopt the necessary measures to confront this new scenario and renew the political commitment that will enable us to build a more consolidated multilateral system that prioritizes, above all, the strengthening of international cooperation, solidarity, equity and unity among the Member States of this Organization."

Alberto Fernández, President of Argentina (video message)

"Two things I want to emphasize that the pandemic left us: first is the importance of prioritizing health and second is that, in crises, as in any emergency, no one can save him- or herself alone. Our Region is undoubtedly one of the most active in cooperation, and particularly active in health cooperation. The post-pandemic recovery presents us with new possibilities for collaboration. Only by investing in public health, from a rights-based approach and with a gender perspective, will we be able to reduce our dependence and vulnerability, and be better prepared to face future global challenges."

Charles Angelo Savarin, President of the Commonwealth of Dominica

"The existential health and economic threats of climate change, non-communicable diseases and new and emerging diseases with the potential for epidemics and pandemics demand now, more than ever, that we stand in solidarity in advancing our health agenda."

Xavier Becerra, Secretary of the United States Department of Health and Human Services

“Through this difficult period, we have come together as a region to combat the scourge of COVID-19 and we are now on a path to recovery and reconstruction. Our path to recovery and reconstruction will only be possible if we rebuild our health systems together and invest the necessary resources in health infrastructure.

Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO) (video message)

“As I have said over the past couple of weeks, we have never been in a better position to end the COVID-19 pandemic as a global health emergency.”

“After two-and-a-half years in a long, dark tunnel, we are just beginning to glimpse the light at the end.”

“But we’re not at the end yet – we’re still in the tunnel, and there are many obstacles that can trip us up if we don’t tread carefully.”

Links

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The Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) works with the countries of the Americas to improve the health and quality of life of its population. Founded in 1902, it is the world’s oldest international public health agency. It serves as the Regional Office of WHO for the Americas and is the specialized health agency of the Inter-American system.