



## PAHO Director opens 60th Directing Council, reflects on progress towards five priority areas of work



**Washington, DC, 25 September 2023 (PAHO)** – At the opening of the 60th Directing Council of the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), Dr. Jarbas Barbosa, PAHO Director, reflected on post-pandemic recovery in the Americas, and committed to strengthened action at the country level to address regional health priorities.

While “my early days in office have been marked by the urgency to recover from the pandemic, and deploy the lessons learned to make PAHO and our region’s health systems stronger,” the lasting impact of COVID-19 is “just one of many health priorities we must address,” Dr. Barbosa said.

The risk of vaccine-preventable diseases remains high, and maternal, neonatal

and child health outcomes must also be improved, the Director said. The rising burden of non-communicable diseases, including mental health conditions, and the effects of climate change also pose a serious threat to health and wellbeing in the Americas.

Yet despite these ongoing challenges, “Latin America and the Caribbean are too often deprioritized by global organizations and in global conversations,” Dr. Barbosa said, highlighting his commitment to advocate for the Region and strengthen its in-country presence, “where the core of our work happens and where the most pressing needs are,” he said.

“In my inauguration speech, I outlined five pillars to guide PAHO’s work under my leadership. Today, I’d like to share the progress we have made so far.”

Regarding the first pillar, **to help Member States end the pandemic in the Americas**, while “COVID-19 is no longer an emergency, it remains a public health priority,” the Director said. It is therefore crucial, “that we make up ground on issues countries were struggling with before COVID,” particularly immunization and maternal mortality.

The second pillar, **to apply the lessons learned from the pandemic**, focuses on the need to increase vaccine manufacturing capacity in Latin America and the Caribbean, “so that we will never again be last in line in a public health emergency.”

Dr. Barbosa highlighted efforts to strengthen the PAHO Regional Platform on Access and Innovation for Health Technologies, to produce mRNA vaccines in Brazil and Argentina, and underscored the importance of the organization’s procurement mechanisms, the Regional Revolving Funds, so they can “increase our ability to accelerate access to innovation and support regional production.”

**Ensuring timely and equitable access to health innovations for all countries in the Region**, the third pillar, “is an area where we need to be ambitious,” Dr. Barbosa said, particularly given the availability of new tools, including new diagnostics for cervical cancer, and pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) for HIV.

“The speed with which we bring the best available health tools to all who need them translates into lives saved,” he added. “This is why I am announcing the relaunch – and reimagination – of the PAHO Disease Elimination Initiative”, an initiative to eliminate more than 30 communicable diseases in the Americas by 2030.

Primary health care is the backbone of health systems and “our first line of defense against outbreaks,” the PAHO Director added. As part of the fourth pillar, **building resilient national health systems based on strong primary health care**, Dr. Barbosa announced the launch of Better Care for NCDs, a new initiative to accelerate incorporation of non-communicable diseases in primary health care.

“Every country in our region is struggling with an increasingly complex and growing NCD burden,” Dr. Barbosa said. “There is no better place to prevent, detect and treat NCDs than in the primary health care system.”

Underlying the organization’s success in all of this is **PAHO’s capacity to support its members**, the fifth guiding pillar.

“We have a remarkable legacy and track record to be proud of,” Dr. Barbosa said. “We must keep looking forward, building to respond to the challenges of today and tomorrow.” PAHO Forward, an initiative to update the organization’s structure and operations to better respond to country needs, aims to embrace innovation and focus on impact.

“We, as public health leaders, have the opportunity to change the lives of millions of people. I pledge to put the full force of our organization toward achieving the goals we have discussed today.”

The 60th PAHO Directing Council, held from 25-29 September 2023, kicked off today, bringing together high-level dignitaries and health authorities from the countries in the Americas to deliberate on policies to strengthen health.

During the week, delegates will discuss a variety of strategies, resolutions and policies aimed at strengthening the region’s health workforce; preventing and controlling non-communicable diseases in children, adolescents, and youth; and improving mental health and suicide prevention in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, among other topics.

The Directing Council is one of PAHO’s governing bodies that brings together the highest health authorities of the Americas to discuss and analyze policies and set priorities for technical cooperation and collaboration among countries.

## Quotes

**Christopher Tufton, Minister of Health & Wellness, Jamaica, and Outgoing**

### **President of the Directing Council**

“We 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.”

### **Maricarmen Plata, Secretary for Access to Rights and Equity of the Organization of American States (OEA)**

“At the OAS, we continue to support PAHO’s work, particularly at this stage of the COVID-19 pandemic with its new challenges and important advances in public health, such as access to vaccines and strengthened focus on recovery strategies, which PAHO has achieved thanks to great efforts during this time. The OAS shares a strategic vision with PAHO, aimed at overcoming regional challenges, strengthening access to health on the basis of Pan American solidarity, equity, universality and social inclusion.”

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

“The United States believes in the mission to ensure good health in the Americas and is committed to a continued partnership with PAHO. Together, we are working to strengthen health systems to improve access to quality health services for all.” “We now face a critical inflection point in recommitting to investing in essential health services to accelerate our collective progress throughout the region. We must work together to make progress on our shared health goals.”

### **Ilan Goldfajn, President, Inter-American Development Bank (IDB)**

“We have all learned firsthand that diseases go beyond national borders. The pandemic also showed that health emergencies aren’t just physical risks, but macroeconomic risks. Our region’s economy shrank almost 7% in 2020, nearly twice the global average. So, we need to scale up investment right now, today and seize the opportunity to prepare health systems for the next pandemic and the consequences of climate change by increasing resilience, quality, and effectiveness of primary health care.”

### **Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director-General, World Health Organization**

“Regionally and globally, the same vulnerabilities that COVID-19 exposed persist. That’s why WHO has developed a plan for a more equitable, inclusive and coherent global architecture for health emergency preparedness and response with equity at its core. The new pandemic accord and amendments to the International Health Regulations will provide the vital legal foundations for this

architecture. I urge all member states to work with a sense of urgency with a particular focus on resolving the most difficult and contentious issues.”

## **Links**

[60th Directing Council](#)

[Provisional agenda](#)

[Working documents](#)

## **MEDIA CONTACTS**

Luciana Viegas: + 1 202 981-8455

Ashley Baldwin: + 1 202 340-4025

Sebastian Oliel: +1 202 316-5679

[mediateam@paho.org](mailto:mediateam@paho.org)

[www.paho.org](http://www.paho.org)

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.