

## **On World Health Day, PAHO Director calls for equitable pandemic recovery in the Americas**

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**Washington, D.C., April 7, 2021 (PAHO)** – On World Health Day, observed today, Pan American Health Organization Director Carissa F. Etienne said that COVID-19 has exposed inequalities that are barriers to health for far too many people in the Americas and called on leaders to make equity the “force guiding recovery from the pandemic.”

The pandemic is estimated to have driven between 119 and 124 million more people globally into extreme poverty last year. It is also estimated that 14 years of gains in the fight against poverty have been lost due to the pandemic. And there is convincing evidence that the pandemic has widened gender gaps in employment, with women exiting the labor force in greater numbers than men over the past 12 months.

“The unprecedented pandemic has brought existing social and economic inequalities to the fore, regrettably exacerbating them,” Dr. Etienne said during a virtual event hosted by PAHO for World Health Day, celebrated to bring attention to vital global health concerns.

“Action to control and treat COVID-19 during the pandemic, as well as during the economic recovery, must be centered on reducing inequalities,” she continued. “We must act decisively now to ensure the right of all members of the population to the highest attainable standard of health.”

During the event, Argentine Minister of Health Carla Vizzotti said, “Without a doubt, the pandemic has put the world and our region to the test – and not only the health sector but also the economic and social sectors.”

The panelists included members of academia and civil society, including the Latin American and Caribbean Confederation of Domestic Workers and the Fund for the Development of Indigenous Peoples of Latin America and the Caribbean. The panelists drew attention to the exclusion of domestic workers from social security, expanding the reach of health services, the need to catalyze justice, and the need to not only generate data and better knowledge about health inequities affecting

marginalized communities but also to take action to reduce inequalities and racial and ethnic inequities.

### **Unequal pandemic suffering and exposure**

Pointing out that people in situations of vulnerability have disproportionately suffered from the pandemic, Dr. Etienne drew attention to those living in crowded, substandard housing with limited access to water and urban informal settlements; essential workers and workers in the informal economy.

These people often already lacked access to quality health care and had the poorest health status. Long histories of structural discrimination often underlie the lack of access and poor social conditions of the groups most at risk. These social determinants of health must be addressed to reduce inequity.

Many of the people most affected by the pandemic – female heads of households and Afro-descendent and indigenous women; people earning minimum wage; those with limited or no access to social protection; and people, most often women, performing unpaid caring work – are also employed in work that exposes them to the virus.

### **Reducing inequities post-pandemic**

“The COVID-19 pandemic has thrived amid the inequalities in our societies and the gaps in our health systems,” said Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director-General for the World Health Organization (WHO). “It is vital for governments to invest in strengthening their health services and to remove the barriers that prevent so many people from using them, so more people have the chance to live healthy lives.”

To defeat COVID-19 and recover with a more equitable world, Dr. Etienne called for:

- Access to vaccines for all people.
- Increased investment in resilient, responsive and adaptive health systems and primary health care (PHC) using the lens of equity and inclusion.
- Expansion of social protection systems.
- Fair income, decent work, inclusive and strong education systems, and decent housing.

- Strengthened national health information systems to target populations being left behind and monitor equity impacts.

“We have the opportunity to transform our societies after this devastating pandemic, Dr. Etienne said. “Starting an equitable and sustainable recovery requires that we prioritize investment in health and social sectors but must also work together with one common goal and shared purpose, recognizing that we must all do our part,” she added. “Equity should be the force guiding recovery from COVID-19 in the Americas.”

### **LINKS**

World Health Day 2021 Video: <https://youtu.be/ZCcES41qTIU>

Virtual World Health Day Event: <https://youtu.be/RzXGEOhs0gA> (English)

Virtual World Health Day Event: <https://youtu.be/xiS8GlqkJxs> (Spanish)

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