



At 62nd Directing Council, PAHO Director calls for swift action to strengthen health security in the Americas



Washington, D.C., 29 September 2025 (PAHO) — Health security is a cornerstone of national stability and economic resilience, Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) Director Dr. Jarbas Barbosa told delegates today at the opening of the Organization's [62nd Directing Council](#), urging governments to turn political commitments into concrete public health policies to protect the people and economies of the Americas.

"Countries in the Americas have long worked together to address regional health security," he said. "Such collaboration is essential for disease prevention, public health resilience, economic stability, and a viable workforce. A unified approach will enhance regional preparedness for current and future health crises, while contributing to broader goals like socio-economic development and sustainable prosperity."

“History has shown that proactive preparation for health crises — including building resilient health systems and capacities for prevention, early detection, and rapid response — can save countless lives and reduce the socio-economic impacts of epidemics,” Dr. Barbosa said.

In a direct appeal to health ministers and officials from across the Region, Dr. Barbosa highlighted that more than 2.4 million public health signals are analyzed each year in the Americas, with nearly half of the 160 detected events categorized as acute public health threats. “Detecting and containing biothreats at their source, and improving emergency response, constitute our first line of defense,” he said. “It requires a whole-of-government approach.”

This year's Directing Council—attended by health authorities from the 35 PAHO Member States, three participating states, and four associated states—comes at a time of continued pressure on health systems and growing threats from both infectious and noncommunicable diseases (NCDs). The meeting is expected to approve PAHO's new Strategic Plan 2026–2031 and a regional Action Plan on NCDs for 2025–2030.

Dr. Barbosa warned that epidemics and pandemics not only endanger lives but can “disrupt trade, travel, tourism, and food supply networks,” noting that global GDP shrank by 3.5% in 2020 due to COVID-19. He stressed that health security is not just about protecting health systems — “it plays in national stability, economic resilience, and the protection of populations.”

The PAHO Director reaffirmed the Organization's role as a trusted technical partner, emphasizing the value of shared regional tools such as the real-time surveillance system and PAHO's Revolving Funds for access to vaccines, medicines, and technologies.

He also highlighted the joint efforts that have positioned the Region as a global leader in communicable disease elimination, noncommunicable disease reduction, primary health care strengthening, and digital transformation. “Our achievements inspire other regions of the world in the pursuit of universal health,” he noted.

Dr. Barbosa called on countries to lead the way in the elimination of preventable diseases, including malaria and cervical cancer, calling them “time-limited investments, not an eternal expense.” He urged countries to sustain the region's legacy in disease elimination as “one of the smartest ways to invest limited resources.”

On the rising burden of noncommunicable diseases (NCDs), the leading cause of death in the Americas, Dr. Barbosa was unequivocal: “They must be among the top priorities for our Region,” he said. “There are well-established ways to address this crisis—from reducing risk factors like tobacco, alcohol, and ultra-

processed foods to promoting physical activity and healthy diets.”

He called for adaptation to this reality by investments in primary health care and innovation, stating that closing the gap in NCD prevention and care is “fundamental to PAHO’s mission.”

Highlighting PAHO’s founding mandate from 1902 to protect the health of the Americas through regional cooperation, Dr. Barbosa said that mission remains unchanged—but more urgent than ever. “The future health and security of our Region will not be determined by what we say this week,” he said. “It will be determined by how quickly our words become policies that countries can act on to protect their people.”

In closing, he reaffirmed PAHO's commitment as a trusted ally. "As Director of PAHO, I want to affirm unequivocally that this Organization is at your service, as a reliable partner committed to building a better future," he said.

Quotes from other opening speakers

Jim O’Neill, Deputy Secretary of Health and Human Services (HSS) of the United States: “Unlike chronic diseases, infectious diseases notoriously cross borders. We are committed to protecting against communicable diseases, and international cooperation is essential to our success — and in this Western Hemisphere, that should largely be PAHO. PAHO has a unique role in helping Member States strengthen preparedness for future health threats while respecting the sovereignty of each Member State. Artificial intelligence is improving science, health care, business, and government. The United States is committed to supporting this transformation, and it will enhance PAHO’s work to harness secure, interoperable digital technologies to expand access to primary health care and sharpen pandemic surveillance.”

Albert Ramdin, Secretary General of the Organization of American States (OAS): “Health underpins every dimension of our society: without it, democracy weakens, economies slow, and social cohesion breaks down. The cross-cutting nature of this agenda was made clear during the lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic. The speed at which it disrupted education, employment, governance, and social cohesion showed us why well-being must remain at the center of our policy thinking. Maintaining that centrality, however, requires political will... PAHO brings unmatched technical expertise, while the OAS, as the political forum of the Hemisphere, can provide the intergovernmental coordination needed to embed health in the broader agenda of regional development.”

Amanda Glassman, Executive Advisor to the President of the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB): “At the IDB, we believe that health is essential for development and resilience. The challenges we face today — from

aging populations and rising NCDs, to the pressures of technological innovation and the sustainability of our health systems — are shared across borders. Our solutions, therefore, must also be shared and regional... PAHO and the IDB work together, and with our member countries, on strengthening primary health care, expanding digital health, and improving preparedness to prevent and respond to infectious disease threats. This Council is a pivotal moment, as we begin discussions for PAHO's Strategic Plan 2026–2031. It is more than a planning exercise — it is the chance to shape a shared vision for health in our region."

Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO): "You have documented progress on key PAHO initiatives on disease elimination, noncommunicable diseases, primary health care, maternal mortality, and digital health... Your agenda this week reflects your shared commitment to promoting, providing and protecting the health of the region's people." "As we navigate these extremely difficult times, it is important also to remember that in this crisis lies an opportunity – an opportunity to shake off the yoke of aid dependency, and embrace a new era of sovereignty, self-reliance, and solidarity."

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MEDIA CONTACTS

Sebastian Oliel: +1 202 316-5679

mediateam@paho.org

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 (OAS).