



Organización  
Panamericana  
de la Salud



Organización  
Mundial de la Salud

OFICINA REGIONAL PARA LAS Américas

## **56th DIRECTING COUNCIL**

***70th SESSION OF THE WHO Regional Committee FOR THE AMERICAS***

*Washington, D.C., USA, 23-27 September 2018*

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**OPENING REMARKS BY AMBASSADOR NÉSTOR MÉNDEZ  
ASSISTANT SECRETARY-GENERAL OF  
THE ORGANIZATION OF AMERICAN STATES**

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**23 September 2018  
Washington, D.C.**

**56th Directing Council of PAHO  
70th session of the WHO Regional Committee for the Americas**

Dr. Carissa Etienne, Director of the Pan American Sanitary Bureau,  
Dr. Octavio Sánchez Midence, Secretary of Health of Honduras,  
Mr. Alex M Azar II, Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services of  
the United States of America,  
Dr. Soumya Swaminathan, Deputy Director-General for Programmes of the  
World Health Organization,  
Honorable Ministers of Health,  
Distinguished Delegates and Members of the Diplomatic Corps,  
Invited Agency Representatives,  
Ladies and Gentlemen:

It is a great honor and pleasure to join you, on a Sunday morning no less, for this important meeting. The deliberations and decisions that will be made at the highest level will be aimed at making a real difference through their positive impact on the lives, well-being and health of the citizens of the Americas, particularly for those in vulnerable situations and those who are traditionally excluded.

From the perspective of the Organization of American States (OAS), we recognize that access to health is a fundamental human right and not a privilege. All people, be they rich or poor, regardless of their race, age, gender, social condition, ethnicity, sexual orientation, origin, or migration status, are entitled to high quality health services to ensure healthy lives and general well-being. This is the principle that inspires our work and is central to our regional agenda on rights and equity towards the realization of "More Rights for More People".

We share a common vision with PAHO, as we appreciate the health as a pillar of development for our region. Our goal to improve and protect the health of our populations requires us to work collaboratively with Member States and strategic partners.

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This echoes the vision laid out in the 2030 Agenda that places health and well-being for all, at all ages, at the center of sustainable development focused on the aim to “leave no one behind.”

The Region has seen significant social and economic progress in recent years. Notwithstanding, the Western Hemisphere still suffers from persistent inequality, which has inevitably translated into insufficient access to high quality public services such as education, health, water and electricity, limiting opportunities for progress and development for the disadvantaged. Nearly 186 million people are still living in poverty (ECLAC, 2016) and nearly 4 out of 10 households in the Region are still considered economically vulnerable.

Many sectors of the region’s population face exponentially higher risks in other areas since health problems are often influenced by factors such as education, socio-cultural level, income, and ethnicity.

In recent years, the countries of the Region have implemented a series of health sector reforms with the aim of increasing equity, effectiveness, and coverage of health systems; regrettably, despite their positive results they have not achieved the proposed goals.

Today we face many challenges in the Americas, ranging from the significant increase in the frequency of natural disasters to the spread of dangerous diseases. According to a recent UN report, there are an average of 68 natural disasters per year. Extreme rainfall and drought are undeniably constant, viruses such as Zika and Chikungunya and other infectious diseases have caused sustained epidemics of unprecedented magnitude.

The number of people living with Noncommunicable Diseases (NCDs) is estimated to be over 200 million, and close to 5.9 million children still suffer from chronic malnutrition particularly in rural areas of the Americas.

Given these numerous challenges, it is important to highlight some of the initiatives by which the OAS is contributing to advancing the right to health in the Americas, working closely with PAHO.

We continue to support the work of the Inter-American Task Force on Noncommunicable Diseases, led by PAHO, to find solutions to a persistent problem that affects the health of a significant percentage of our citizens, and claims close to 3.9 million deaths per year.

During the OAS General Assembly held last June in Washington DC, Member States issued a resolution that offers institutional support to PAHO, in order to strengthen multi-sectoral responses to the crisis of Noncommunicable Diseases in the Americas. This mandate will enable the expansion of policy initiatives beyond the health sector given the social and economic burden posed by these diseases on national governments.

Last February we joined PAHO's High Level Commission on Universal Health that plans to guide PAHO in conducting activities of the Regional Forum on Universal Health. This Commission will produce a comprehensive report with recommendations for the strengthening of health systems, and the empowerment of individuals and communities to advance toward universal health in the Americas.

I have the pleasure to co-chair this Commission with Her Excellency, President Michelle Bachelet, and through our technical expertise, we are contributing to the preparation of this report. We will also support its dissemination through our networks and forums. All this work falls in line with the principles of the Social Charter of the Americas and its Plan of action that prioritize universal access to health care and universal coverage for all, as well as social protection models in health care, particularly for populations in situations of vulnerability.

We have recently celebrated the 30-year anniversary of the adoption of the Additional Protocol to the American Convention on Human Rights in the area of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, also known as the Protocol of San Salvador.

The Protocol of San Salvador is a unique, binding juridical instrument for the observance of social rights for the citizens of the region, including the right to health for everyone, without distinction. The implementation of the commitments by States parties to the Protocol has allowed the development of a pioneering process in the Region to measure rights based on indicators. The countries submit periodic reports on their progress, and these are analyzed by an Independent Working group of experts. The information and recommendations generated by the San Salvador Working Group enables States parties to permanently review and reformulate public policies in the area of economic, social, cultural and environmental rights, including health policies to address emerging challenges.

We have also continued working in collaboration with PAHO in consumer safety and health issues in the Americas through the Consumer Safety and Health Network (CSHN). The next General Assembly of the Consumer Health and Safety network will be held in Lima, Peru, at the end of October.

Taking into account the large-scale natural catastrophes that affect the Region every year, including hurricanes, earthquakes, landslides, all of which affect in greater proportion people in vulnerable situations, the OAS continues to support Member States' humanitarian efforts in the aftermath of these events.

The unprecedented wave of migration flows of Venezuelan citizens that has now escalated into a crisis of regional consequences. The devastation of the health-care system and the shortages of food and medical supplies have spurred outbreaks of treatable diseases, malnutrition and rising death rates. The country has experienced an upsurge in the spread of treatable and communicable diseases, and illnesses and viral diseases that were once under control have reappeared, including tuberculosis, poliomyelitis, malaria, diphtheria and measles, among others. These illnesses are spreading to neighboring countries and causing further strain at the overcrowded border hospitals. This humanitarian crisis has significant implications for the rest of the Americas, especially in terms of the capacity to provide health services and social protection to such populations.

In this regard, during the last General Assembly, OAS Member States adopted a resolution on the situation of Venezuela, which among other stipulations, provides for the entry of humanitarian aid to that nation. The Resolution calls for the implementation of epidemiological surveillance measures in the country to prevent the aggravation of the humanitarian and public health crisis, particularly against the resurgence of diseases such as measles, malaria, and diphtheria. We reiterate the urgency for immediate action.

In conclusion, I highlight our Organization's unwavering commitment to advancing the right to health in the region, and to responding proactively to our mandates in this important goal. Our political forum will continue to be a space for dialogue so that the OAS, PAHO, member countries and all stakeholders have an important space to discuss and exchange ideas, proposing solutions for the development of inclusive and comprehensive public policies to advance the health agenda with a rights perspective and equity vision in the region.

I am left only to reiterate the highest exhortation and encouragement to the Ministers of Health gathered here to continue to support our institutional efforts to maximize the impact of our actions to protect the most vulnerable among us, to the end that we can secure a safe and healthy future for all.

Thank you.

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