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Fourth meeting of the Forum of the Countries of Latin America and the Caribbean on Sustainable Development

Opening Remarks for the Panel on - Health and the Economy: A false dichotomy?

March 17, 2021

Honorable Ministers

Distinguished delegates of the 4th Forum of Latin America and the Caribbean on Sustainable Development,

Regional Directors of United Nations Agencies and Members of the Regional Collaborative Platform

Distinguished panelists, colleagues.

Alicia,

A very good morning to you.

I am truly pleased to be with you this morning to provide brief opening remarks at this high-level panel and to listen to the subsequent interventions from countries. **Your reflections this morning on this important topic will be of the highest relevance for the future health and development of all peoples in Latin America and the Caribbean.**

I take this opportunity to congratulate Alicia Barcena and her team at ECLAC for the excellent report Building forward better: action to strengthen the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, that was launched yesterday and for the seminal role that they have played over the years and particularly during this pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been the greatest health crisis this Region, and indeed the world, has faced in over 100 years. We have seen how countries rapidly invested and scaled up response in the face of the pandemic, strengthening capacities of health systems and services to save lives in the face of COVID-19.. And we have witnessed the rapid expansion of social protection programs throughout the Americas, to mitigate increased levels of impoverishment, and protect vulnerable populations who have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19 : women, the elderly, afro-descendant and indigenous populations.

The countries in this Region have **highlighted the challenge of sustained and collective action in the face of this pandemic** which has already cost the lives of 1.27 million (as of March 15) in Latin America and the Caribbean, and has impacted every single person in this Region. There is no doubt the pandemic has wreaked havoc on economies, jobs, lives and livelihoods. And yet, in the responses mounted by countries, we heard of policy, social and technological innovation that has accelerated through our societies, supporting critical health and social sectors sustaining action against the epidemic, while adapting and facilitating operations within other sectors including education, labor and the economy.

It is one year and one week since WHO formally declared a pandemic. The journey we have traveled collectively, has been challenging for all peoples and countries, and for Latin America and the Caribbean as a Region. **Our health, social and economic systems have been stretched to the limit:** they have worked hand in glove, adjusting measures in each sector as the pandemic has ebbed and flowed. And even as new diagnostics and lifesaving vaccines are deployed, a number of countries are now facing a new surge in COVID-19 cases. The evidence we have accumulated over the past 12 months is clear: **nothing can substitute for effective leadership and science-based public health measures as the means to control this pandemic, save lives, and support economic activity.**

[PAUSE]

And so as we look forward into 2021 and beyond, I need to **call your attention to 4 critical actions that we must prioritize to bring to an end this pandemic, and to accelerate towards an inclusive and sustainable recovery** towards the achievement of the SDGs in this Region.

Firstly, **massive, sustained and continued intervention by countries is required in the immediate and foreseeable future**, to suppress COVID19, protect health gains, and tackle increasing poverty levels and the health and social inequalities that are worsening throughout the Region. We cannot relax our efforts even as vaccine deployment advances. We must continue to implement public health measures, and make every effort to ensure the provision of essential health services to address priority health needs. From a human rights perspective, health protection is an ethical imperative, given that when life is protected, societies' productive capacity is strengthened. We are reminded that life, health, and well-being constitute prerequisites for economic and sustainable recovery in the context of COVID19.

Secondly, **the reduction of inequalities constitutes a central linchpin for action during the pandemic, as well as during the economic recovery.** Action is required now to protect vulnerable populations impacted through higher COVID-19 infection rates, worse COVID-19 severity, lack of access to treatment, and higher COVID-19 mortality rates. And sustaining and expanding social protection is critical not just to tackle the pandemic, but to improve pandemic preparedness in the future. A more profound, structural and cross-sectoral approach to social protection – including social protection in health – will support improved health and future development in the Americas.

Thirdly, **it is now time to address the structural deficiencies we have witnessed in the health sector during this pandemic that are a consequence of years of inadequate public investment.** The current social and economic crisis has been generated by a health crisis. Future strategies and policies for inclusive sustainable and accelerated recovery to the COVID-19 pandemic must be built on addressing weakness in health systems. Our future health systems must be:

- resilient, responsive and adaptive;
- based on the basic principle of the guarantee of rights, protections and access to health,
- built on the vision of Universal Access to Health and Universal Health Coverage and the foundational structure of Primary Health Care;
- inclusive and integrated with well-developed and comprehensive social protection mechanisms.

Prioritizing health and strengthening health systems based on the **primary health care approach and the essential public health functions, constitute the foundation for the control of the pandemic, the recuperation of lost public health gains, and accelerated recovery in the future.**

Finally, our health and economies are dependent on the production, availability and equitable access to pharmaceutical products, vaccines, medical supplies and diagnostics. And frankly speaking, Latin America and the Caribbean has been found wanting. **It is clear that we need to address the lack of production capacity in this region to be better prepared for the next pandemic.**

Few countries produce vaccines with little private sector participation in the Region. Policies in science, technology and innovation have not targeted the health technology sector, and there has been little investment - public and private -in the development of the health technology institutions, and health technology development clusters with the participation of academia and the industry. This is true for vaccines, medicines, diagnostics and personal protective equipment.

PAHO is working with its partners, including ECLAC, on this issue right now, to support the health, science and technology and the industrial sectors to create the necessary conditions for increased manufacturing capacity in this Region in the future. In addition, I am convening Ministers of Health on this issue as part of our Governing Bodies meetings this year, so that their voices can be heard in discussions with finance, science and technology, and industry, and so that we can ensure that we have the necessary medical supplies to address our health needs for the future, in normal and pandemic times.

[PAUSE]

Distinguished colleagues, while we continue to tackle COVID-19 and look to a future post-pandemic, **we must remain committed to strive for the realization of our vision for the Americas: Health for All.**

We will need to renew our social contract, and strengthen the interaction and agreements between government, civil society, and the private sector. We will need to implement structural and transformative action across health, social and economic sectors. And most importantly, we will need strong political leadership and the willingness to effect change.

The pandemic has impacted us all. Together, collectively we must act, to work towards more inclusive, sustainable, resilient and inclusive societies that will allow future generations in Latin America to survive and thrive.

Thank you.
