



PAN AMERICAN HEALTH ORGANIZATION
WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION



27th PAN AMERICAN SANITARY CONFERENCE
59th SESSION OF THE REGIONAL COMMITTEE

Washington, D.C., USA, 1-5 October 2007

CSP27/DIV/8
ORIGINAL: ENGLISH
SPANISH

**ACCEPTANCE SPEECH BY THE DIRECTOR OF THE
PAN AMERICAN SANITARY BUREAU
DR. MIRTA ROSES PERIAGO
3 October 2007**

Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am profoundly and sincerely grateful for this expression of wholehearted support and the extraordinary honor that you have just bestowed upon me.

I interpret it as an expression of personal trust and endorsement of the efforts of each and every one of the members of the remarkable team of the Organization that I am honored to lead. The support, commitment, ability, and public service calling and ethic of each and every member of the PAHO team have been and will continue to be the life's blood of our efforts to meet the public health challenges in our era.

I am well aware that this vote of confidence implies an enormous responsibility. With humility, unwavering dedication, and the steadfast support that all of you and our partners and allies in health development have given me, I shall continue to advance PAHO's noble mission on behalf of public health in the Region. I am fully confident that through our combined efforts, PAHO, this young and exemplary centenarian, will continue to play a key role in guaranteeing the well-being of all the peoples of the Americas.

Serving our hopeful, striving peoples who aspire to better living and health conditions is, after all, the ultimate purpose of our efforts. It is why I came to public health from the domains of clinical medicine and the epidemiology of communicable disease, serving in my country's Ministry of Health and later deciding to join the Organization. It is a calling that has required the sacrifice and vital support of my family, on whom I have always been able to count. It is why you, dear colleagues and respected Ministers, devote enormous efforts to overcoming the challenges in public health.

Today, moreover, I am especially moved when I see that we women now have increasing opportunities to serve in decision-making positions. This demonstrates that the commitments to gender equity made by the Member States, PAHO and WHO, and the entire United Nations system, can become a reality. The Director-General of WHO is a woman, half the Representative Offices in the countries are headed by women, and 13 of our Ministers of Health are women.

Allow me to give a special nod to Dr. Margaret Chan, whose ability, energy, and commitment to the world's neediest are a source of pride for the extended family of WHO. I would also like to recall the memory of a much-loved friend, whose humanity, call to service, and contagious bonhomie I carry in my heart always, as do all of you: Dr. Lee Jong-wook.

Five years ago, I said that in the current context of globalization and integration, I would work to focus technical cooperation on meeting the countries' needs, promote greater equity, and increase the participation of all actors in order to promote and achieve health for all. We have not let up in this effort and, thanks to the extraordinary work of our team in the Organization, we can say with pride today that, although some areas are still in need of strengthening, we have made great strides in all the key areas.

Our successes have included the adoption of the Regional Program Budget Policy, the identification of priority countries, and the fight against HIV/AIDS in the Caribbean and the rest of the Region, which enabled us to meet the regional goals of the 3 x 5 Initiative. The reorganization of the Caribbean Program Coordination Office, the creation of the Eastern Caribbean Program Coordination Office, and the recent establishment of four Program Offices in Anguilla, Antigua and Barbuda, Dominica, and Grenada have for the first time established a permanent presence for the Organization in the smallest of our Member States.

We have taken this action to boost our capacity to meet the specific needs of the countries. I know that we must continue building on our successes in this area to guarantee an impact on health indicators and outcomes. We must work to ensure that the nearly 30% reduction in mortality from HIV/AIDS in the Caribbean achieved with the use of antiretroviral therapies is accompanied by progress in prevention to lower the infection rate; and we must intensify technical cooperation with the priority countries.

Before my election, in order to ensure that I would not forget the people with the greatest health needs, Don Mario, a Chorote tribal leader from my country, gave me a ribbon and then a new one afterwards, as is the custom with lasting commitments. I have not forgotten that commitment nor will I. Fostering greater equity in all areas has ever and everywhere been what guides my work.

The Millennium Development Goals are the highest expression of intent in the search for equity and the fight against inequality. We are halfway to our target date and must redouble our efforts to ensure that the health goals set in the MDGs, especially the reduction of infant mortality and the elimination of chronic malnutrition, are met and become a tangible reality for the most forgotten and excluded women and children.

We who are fighting social exclusion must look beyond the averages, for they can impose a tyranny that makes the neediest people invisible. By making them visible, really visible, we empower them and encourage inclusive policies and programs that foster equity. That is the purpose of the Faces, Voices, and Places Initiative. We will continue to intensely promote community action with the enthusiastic support of our participating Member States and our sister agencies from the United Nations and Inter-American systems.

In the past five years the Region has seen a reduction in poverty. Nearly 20 million people have gotten out of poverty. This is attributable in part to economic growth; however, the ambitious, well-designed social policies of the countries have also played a role. Even so, we are not still at the levels of the 1980s. We must take advantage of these favorable circumstances with new, integrated social policy mechanisms, especially those related to free, guaranteed maternal and child care. Only then will we manage to attain the most difficult of the Millennium Development Goals.

Expanding participation to include all the actors involved in public health to promote synergy and synchronous joint action, good management, the use of scientific

information and knowledge, and best practices is what keeps me up at night. The recent Summit of Caribbean heads of State, held in Trinidad and Tobago to explore the issue of how to fight communicable diseases, which was the first of its kind in the Region and worldwide; the efforts of the Ibero-American networks; and the action to promote ratification of the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control are but a few of the many examples of this approach.

Good ideas have the virtue of being contagious—especially when the inspiration is health, as demonstrated in Vaccination Week in the Americas, whose fifth edition reached 55 million children, adolescents, adults, and older persons and has inspired similar efforts in other regions. The fight against measles, which began in the Andean subregion and later expanded to the Caribbean and the rest of the Region, has spilled beyond our Hemisphere to Africa, where 65% of the goal has been met.

Promoting health for all is the North Star that guides and inspires us. I am moved by the renewed energy that the Region has generated with Primary Health Care. The international meeting known as Buenos Aires 30/15, which many of us here were privileged to attend, was a powerful impetus to the global process spearheaded by Dr. Chan. Thanks to the vision of the Minister of Health and the Government of Argentina, we witnessed with emotion the passing of the torch from the pioneers of Alma-Ata to the new generations of activists-- physicians and nonphysicians; general, family, community, and public health practitioners with a real calling.

Making health a reality for all still demands more and greater partnerships, attracting new actors to the cause of public health and keeping the issue high on the political agenda as an indicator of government performance. For this task, the great successes achieved-- sometimes with no possibility of moving forward but treading water to maintain them as protection during the frequent periodic crises and prevent greater harm-- compel and inspire us to continue building our marvelous team devoted to health in the Americas.

I've just come from a visit to Villa Centenario in El Salvador and Jérémie in Haiti, and I can assure you that these communities are witnessing profound and positive changes in their living conditions. Their children and young people, their leaders, inspire us and are demanding faster and better responses.

The proud heir to an invaluable and more than century-old tradition of promoting public health, PAHO in the 21st Century will continue to forge the new model of joint action in service to the peoples of the Region. To this end, we will intensify the development of results-based management and continue to make instruments for collaboration and interprogrammatic efforts a fixture of our institutional culture.

Honorable Ministers, Delegates, partners and allies, PAHO colleagues, the successes that we have achieved and challenges before us remind us that we share the most beautiful of missions, serving our fellow man, our brothers and sisters throughout the Americas, promoting greater and better public health for all to prolong life, reduce disease, pain, and

suffering, and ensure a productive life with dignity for all the inhabitants of the Hemisphere.

I have an extraordinary team – capable, experienced, and committed to its mission. We have consolidated our financial resources. We have clear objectives and the wholehearted support of our Member States.

I am therefore moved by your generous endorsement but also confident that we will know how to meet your expectations and the needs of the peoples of the Region. I thank you and accept the responsibility and honor that you have bestowed upon me. You may rest assured that, as I have done these past five years, I will devote myself fully and to the best of my ability to fulfilling this sacred mission.

Thank you very much.