

Rebuilding wellbeing in the aftermath of the pandemic: Investing in health systems resilience and mental health

Santiago, Chile, January 24, 2023

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

COVID-19 has unleashed an unprecedented socioeconomic and health crisis, and devastated communities across Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC). Fundamental changes must be initiated to strengthen health systems to regain lost ground and avoid similar losses in the future. Better recovery is imperative, but it will be challenging and will require innovation to better prepare for future crises, implement effective universal health coverage, and improve human capital outcomes.

Underinvestment in public health before the pandemic left health systems in LAC severely underprepared. While home to only 8.5 percent of the world's population, the region accounted for 13 percent of all COVID-19 cases as of July 2022. The economic contraction that occurred at the time of the pandemic was the largest in the last 100 years and the worst worldwide: the GDP for the region contracted by 7 percent in 2020. Furthermore, the 170 million children and youth in the region have lived through one of the longest school closures in the world during the pandemic.

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic only further exacerbated the need to urgently address a global mental health crisis. It is estimated by the World Health Organization that the pandemic led to at least a 25% increase in the rate of already highly prevalent mental health conditions such as depression and anxiety disorders, affecting disproportionately women and reflected in high suicide rates among young people. The pandemic took a heavy toll on the mental health and wellbeing of health care professionals across the region.

With shrinking health budgets following the COVID-19 crisis response, countries need to set priorities for high-yield resilience spending. The most impactful and cost-effective public investments are those that target upstream interventions, especially essential public health functions, as well as health promotion, disease prevention and primary health care.

Governments in Latin America and the Caribbean should consider five strategic directions for further investments to strengthen the resilience of health systems to future shocks:

- ▶ **Achieve effective Universal Health Coverage through high-performing primary health care**
- ▶ **Ensure that health systems are emergency ready**
- ▶ **Mobilize adequate financing for health sector resiliency**
- ▶ **Take a life course approach to investments in better human capital outcomes**
- ▶ **Build climate-resilient, climate-smart health systems**

Targeted, urgent action must be taken to address the global mental health crisis. This includes shifting mindsets to address mental disorders with the same skill, compassion, and urgency as other health disorders; investing in better mental health outcomes for individuals and prioritizing effective programs and holistic, equitable interventions; and recognizing that mental health is a whole-of-government, whole-of-society imperative.

We, national leaders in LAC, with the support of national and international partners, call on health ministers and finance ministers of Latin America and the Caribbean to further invest in cost-efficient interventions to strengthen the resilience of health systems and mental health outcomes, and report back within one year to discuss initial progress and plans to advance this agenda further. Other countries can join this effort and share initiatives and innovations to ensure that our health systems are resilient, financially sustainable, and deliver better population health outcomes and trust in health systems to all.