JOINT SUMMIT WORKING GROUP OEA/Ser.E

Meeting of High Authorities GTCC/doc.73/20rev.1corr.1

April 3, 2020 13 April 2020

Washington, D.C. Original: Spanish

**FINAL REPORT**

**Meeting of High Authorities of the Joint Summit Working Group (JSWG)
on the Impact of COVID-19 in the Americas**

The Meeting of High Authorities of the Joint Summit Working Group (JSWG)[[1]](#endnote-1) on the Impact of COVID-19 in the Americas was held on April 3, 2020, via teleconference. It was convened by the Secretary General of the Organization of American States (OAS), Mr. Luis Almagro, in his capacity as Chair of the JSWG, together with Dr. Carissa F. Etienne, Director of the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO).

The purpose of the meeting was to address the situation in the region with respect to the COVID-19 pandemic; to hear about the work being done in the region in that regard by the organizations that make up the JSWG; and to discuss a coordinated, joint response.

1. **Opening remarks by the Secretary General of the OAS and Chair of the Joint Summit Working Group (JSWG), Luis Almagro Lemes**

In welcoming the participants, the OAS Secretary General thanked them for taking part in the meeting focusing on the public health emergency triggered by the outbreak and spread of the Coronavirus (COVID-19), with a view to activating a multisectoral coordination and response body to lend support to PAHO and, in particular, the countries in the region.

The Secretary General called for identification of social support mechanisms for vulnerable segments of the population especially hard hit by the pandemic and for care to ensure a gender perspective in the response, given that women in the region are particularly impacted as they account for 70% of the health sector workforce and many productive sectors, especially in the region's microenterprises. As regards the impact of social confinement measures, he underscored the heightened risk of violence against women, especially domestic violence.

**2. Current state of the COVID-19 pandemic**

Dr. Carissa F. Etienne, Director of PAHO, provided an update on preparedness and response measures in the Americas focusing on four objectives: a) ensuring that countries receive information in real time and efficient coordination of national and regional response operations; b) limiting transmission of the virus among people and curtailing events that facilitate transmission; c) promptly identifying, isolating, and caring for patients; and d) relaying critical information about risks and events to the community, while countering false information.

She maintained that, as of April 2, 51 countries and territories were home to 247,473 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and 5,600 deaths. At the time, those figures represented a 14% increase in the number of cases and a 23% increase in deaths. Of those countries, the United States accounted for 86% of cases, followed by Canada, Brazil, Chile, and Ecuador. She also stated that 33 of the 35 countries in the region had closed their borders, the exceptions being Mexico and Nicaragua. The countries with the most confirmed cases had expanded surveillance and laboratory tests.

Almost all the countries in the region had declared a national emergency and were working around the clock to establish COVID-19 health care facilities.

**Measures during the preparatory phase**

* The countries in the region have been boosting national capacity to respond to outbreaks of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS).
* The region contains some 700 SARS surveillance facilities.
* Thirty-one (31) countries are able to conduct testing for COVID-19; and all countries in the region have been developing national plans to prepare for flu epidemics and strengthening core public health functions, while assessing their capacity to meet International Health Regulations (IHR).

**Measures during the response phase**

* Daily updates sent out since December 31 to all member states via the National Focal Point established under the IHR, along with the publication of alerts and updates regarding new coronavirus epidemic outbreaks from January.
* On January 17, 2020, the Pan American Sanitary Bureau activated the Organization's comprehensive response aimed at offering technical assistance to the 51 countries and territories in the region to help them address and mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.
* Support to member states with strengthening national response plans and analysis of shortcomings, surveillance, detection of cases and tracking of contacts, building lab capacity by providing testing kits and training, infection prevention and control, including the provision of personal protection equipment (PPE), training, and so on.
* Briefing updates with health ministers, permanent missions to the OAS, sub-regional entities, National Emergency Management Offices, United Nations agencies, international partners, and the media.
* Guidance, training, provisions and equipment for: surveillance, infection prevention and control, clinical management, hospital preparedness, communication of risks, and so on.

**The multiple challenges that the region faces in its response to COVID-19**

* For lack of RT-PCR (molecular) tests, the countries in the region are acquiring other kinds of lab kits, including rapid tests of as yet unknown quality.
* A shortage of personal protection equipment (PPE), which places health professionals at greater risk, especially in countries with weak health systems. PAHO is working with the member states and the World Health Organization (WHO) to gain access to PPE.
* Health systems in the region are segmented and fragmentary, with poor and vulnerable groups disadvantaged with respect to access, while social protection systems are also weak.
* Scant availability of ventilators and shortages of health workers in some countries.
* International air traffic restrictions have also impaired the distribution of medicines and inputs, including those needed to treat COVID-19.

Dr. Etienne reiterated the huge challenge posed by the COVID-19 crisis in the region, which is overwhelming health systems, in a context in which essential health services also have to be maintained.

**3. Actions undertaken by JSWG institutions to mitigate the effects of COVID-19 in the region**

**3.1 Remarks by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC)**

Ms. Alicia Bárcena, Executive Secretary of ECLAC, pointed out that the COVID-19 epidemic has hit us when our health systems are fragmented and lack universal coverage, with more than 47% of the population without access to social security. She added that there will be serious economic and social consequences, with regional GDP projected to decline by at least 1.8% in 2020. She, too, stressed the need for a multisectoral response to the crisis. ECLAC efforts in response to the COVID-19 crisis include:

* Implementing the COVID-19 Observatory to support tracking and monitoring of medium- and long-term progress by countries in the region. The Observatory compiles and makes available both the public policies that the Latin American and Caribbean countries are adopting to limit the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and its analysis of the economic and social impacts they will have at both national and sectoral levels ([www.cepal.org](https://mail.oas.org/owa/redir.aspx?C=a59200e6cb4346d294eccd33f5265bc0&URL=http%3a%2f%2fwww.cepal.org)).
* Publication of the report entitled: "Latin America and the Caribbean and the COVID-19 Pandemic: Economic and Social Effects," which addresses the short-term outlook, scenarios, and projections with respect to the pandemic and makes recommendations regarding policies worth taking in a number of spheres.

With respect to employment and income of the region's inhabitants, Ms. Bárcena said that a 5% decline in income was expected. She pointed to major challenges involving unemployment insurance, accessing the informal population, and health care coverage. She urged that the region adopt a joint stance vis-à-vis international financial organizations calling on them to re-think the situation of highly indebted middle-income countries, whose economies are being severely impacted.

**3.2. Remarks by the Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture (IICA)**

The Director General of IICA, Mr. Manuel Otero, maintained that, in a context of increasing concern about food security in the Hemisphere, IICA was providing member states with relevant information focusing on that issue and making specific technical cooperation proposals.

He said that, in addition to implementing a Food Security Advisory Council, providing analysis and recommendations for decision-making, and publishing a Food Security Monitor, IICA was promoting virtual meetings of ministers of agriculture in the various regions and sub-regions of the Hemisphere. Those meetings serve to voice concerns about the production, inventories, logistics, and marketing of food, the slowdown in trade, the fate of seasonal/migrant workers, and price shifts. IICA picks up on the suggestions made in order to craft technical cooperation proposals for enhancing agricultural, livestock, and other rural institutions in the Americas.

**3.3 Remarks by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)**

Mr. Ángel Gurría, Secretary-General of the OECD, underscored the need to consolidate the multilateral approach to managing the situation. His analysis focused on the impacts of measures on the regional economy. According to the OECD, annual GDP growth will fall by 2% for each month that a country pursues a confinement policy and that will directly impact the sectors that account for up to one third of the GDP of the major economies.

He said the OECD had been taking part in meetings with international financial organizations to address the issue of highly indebted developing countries, with a particular emphasis on the Caribbean region. In that scenario, development had to be leveraged with greater outside funding. Mr. Gurría also mentioned concern about accessing the informal sectors and the impact of confinement on income generation in a region characterized by precarious employment and citizens' mistrust of governments.

The OECD is making a new platform available ([http://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/](https://mail.oas.org/owa/redir.aspx?C=b7765972c758496f9f553619e0ffeaa0&URL=http%3a%2f%2fwww.oecd.org%2fcoronavirus%2f)) in response to the COVID-19 crisis, with a view to providing timely data, analysis, advice, and solutions, as well as information about the health-related, economic, and social measures being adopted by countries all over the world.

**3.4 Remarks by the World Bank**

Mr. Humberto López, Acting Vice President for Latin America and the Caribbean Region, said he agreed with previous speakers' analysis of the region's vulnerability in the face of COVID-19, with its highly indebted economies and the drop in sources of income.

* He said that financial and technical assistance was to be provided on two fronts: immediate response to the health emergency and ongoing support to address the socio-economic impacts of the pandemic.
* Support for projects to address the health emergency in Ecuador, Paraguay, Argentina, and Haiti, and projects in four Central American countries were about to be approved.
* The Bank would also lend support for the purchase of essential health-care equipment, such as ventilators and medical supplies.
* He said that between US$7 billion and US$10 billion were available to support countries' economic and social plans for mitigating the long-term impacts.
* Mr. López added that the World Bank, the IDB, and the International Monetary Fund were working hand-in-hand to lend support to countries.

**3.5 Remarks by the Development Bank of Latin America (CAF)**

Mr. Víctor Rico, Secretary General of the CAF, said that the CAF had set a series of measures in motion to address the emergency in its shareholder countries, including:

* Support for the health sectors, treasuries, and private sectors in those countries, including micro, small and medium-sized enterprises.
* Activation of a contingent line of credit of US$50 million per country.
* A US$2.5 billion line of credit to mitigate the economic effects of the spread of the virus.
* Support to the banking system, especially development banks, to enable them to lend to the productive sector, especially small and medium-sized enterprises.
* Non-reimbursable technical cooperation to address the pandemic in the amount of up to US$400,000 per country for immediate actions and purchases relating to the COVID-19 pandemic.

**3.6 Presentation by the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB)**

Mr. Fabrizio Opertti, Manager of the IDB's Integration and Trade Sector, said that the Bank was providing more flexible access to short-term funding for the region. It was also freeing up Policy Based Loans and funds for portfolio restructuring so as to enable countries to attend to emergencies. He said the IDB's main focus right now was on:

* Addressing immediate public health emergencies in keeping with WHO guidelines for reducing transmission of the virus and mitigating impacts.
* Public hiring and procurement procedures and health-related value chains. He said the IDB was coordinating with competent bodies via the Inter-American Government Procurement Network (INGP) of the OAS. The IDB was working on implementing a platform for accessing supplies of the goods needed to attack the pandemic.
* The re-scheduling of existing loans in order to prioritize response to the crisis; the strengthening of national social security networks for vulnerable segments of the population and increasing transfers; increasing the economic productivity of employment through small and medium-sized enterprises.
* Support for fiscal policies to address economic impacts between sub-areas, in connection with the financing of outlays needed to address the crisis, the continuity of government procurement outlays, and economic recovery. Mr. Opertti said that the IDB was supporting private sector participation in response to the crisis via the Americas Business Dialogue.

**3.7 Remarks by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)**

Mr. Luis Felipe López Calvo, UNDP Deputy Director for Latin America, underscored the institution's support for preparedness, response, and recovery in connection with the COVID-19 crisis. He said that the Country Offices of UNDP in Latin America and the Caribbean were working closely with their counterparts in governments, offering them timely and relevant programmatic and policy support, in addition to facilitating the purchase of testing kits, personal protection equipment, and other medical equipment.

He mentioned that, at the regional level, UNDP had published a [*Series of COVID-19 Policy Papers*](https://www.latinamerica.undp.org/content/rblac/en/home/library/crisis_prevention_and_recovery/evidence--experience--and-pertinence-in-search-for-effective-pol.html), to foster collective reflection on how best to respond to this crisis and its economic and social effects. The series includes a regional analysis and documents analyzing the socio-economic impact of the crisis at the country level. Mr. López Calvo said that this series also contributes to the integrated approach established in the United Nations reform and hopes to make a major contribution to a coherent response by the United Nations development system at the global, regional, and national level.

**3.8 Remarks by the International Organization for Migration (IOM)**

Mr. Luca Dall’Oglio, Chief of Mission at the Washington D.C. Office, emphasized the need for cooperation in the current crisis caused by COVID-19 and said that the situation points also to the need to focus efforts on groups in vulnerable circumstances, especially the migrant population. Another matter of great concern to IOM is the economic impact on the region of the decline in remittances. Three fronts were especially important:

* Special measures to enable migrant care centers to comply with basic sanitary requirements.
* Access to legal protection and social services systems.
* Measures to enable migrants to return to their countries of origin.

For further details about the presentations made by the JSWG organizations, please visit: <http://scm.oas.org/pdfs/2020/SUMMIT/GTCCCOVID19.PDF>

Following the remarks made by entities pertaining to the JSWG, the OAS Secretary General gave the floor to the representative of the Chair of the Summits Process.

**Remarks by the Chair of the Summits of the Americas Process**

Peru's National Coordinator for the Summits Process, Ambassador Luis Enrique Chávez Basagoitia, speaking on behalf of the Chair of the Summits Process, maintained that the Joint Communiqué to be issued by the JSWG, as proposed during the meeting, would be highly useful. He therefore urged the authorities of the JSWG entities to continue their work in support of the efforts being made by countries to confront the COVID-19 crisis, which has put every system at their disposal to the test. He added that it would be important for the agencies to continue supporting States' efforts to plan for the time following this crisis. He also said that, whereas now the discussion is about economic and health-related response mechanisms, which is vital in the short term, the OAS and the Summits follow-up process were also forums for subsequent reflection on how best to organize much greater preparedness for unforeseen emergencies such as this.

**4. Conclusions**

The JSWG organizations mentioned the implementation, or need to implement, inter alia, the following measures:

* Emergency support
* Strengthening of health systems
* Mitigation of economic impacts
* More flexible terms for accessing financial resources
* Support for micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises
* Support for segments of the population disproportionately hard-hit by the crisis, including women employed in the most affected sectors and migrants
* Support for Caribbean countries, that will be doubly affected, along with highly indebted low- and middle-income countries.

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They also agreed that the crisis triggered by COVID-19 makes it essential to strengthen multilateralism in the region, given that, now more than ever, global efforts are needed to address a situation that overwhelms the capacities of individual countries in the region.

The organizations agreed that the crisis induced by the pandemic will have dire economic and social consequences for the region, making it necessary to have an inclusive strategy for facilitating more proactive support for the countries in the region.

The JSWG organizations also underscored the need for greater flexibility for using financial resources in the short term, and for regional solidarity, and they committed to continue efforts to coordinate with a view to bolstering response capabilities at the national and regional level, thereby addressing the multiple dimensions of the crisis unleashed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The members of the JSWG agreed to meet periodically to ensure ongoing coordination and to update the information shared among them.

1. The Joint Summit Working Group (JSWG) comprises the Organization of American States (OAS), the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), the World Bank, the Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture (IICA), the Development Bank of Latin America (CAF), the Caribbean Development Bank (CDB), the Central American Bank for Economic Integration (CABEI), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the International Labour Organization (ILO), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development(OECD). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)