



Profile

Jarbas Barbosa da Silva Jr: new Director of PAHO



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On Feb 1, 2023, Jarbas Barbosa da Silva Jr will succeed Carissa Etienne of Dominica as Director of the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO). Speaking to *The Lancet* ahead of his 5-year term, Barbosa outlined the “very complex epidemiological scenario” in the Americas, including the double burden of infectious and non-communicable diseases and the substantial toll from accidents and violence. For him, “it’s important for PAHO to provide a response to all these priorities”. But his ambition for the Americas is “to recover better than we were in pre-pandemic 2019 because the reality is that for many relevant Sustainable Development Goal indicators, we were not on track”.

To reach this vision, Barbosa thinks it is important for PAHO to present PAHO member states with the most innovative, cost-efficient strategies and technologies to tackle health issues. “PAHO needs to be the lead agency to provide innovative solutions to the problems that the health systems are dealing with in the region. We have many successful demonstration projects in the region”, he comments, including post-exposure prophylaxis for HIV in vulnerable groups, use of mobile phones to engage more tuberculosis patients in DOTS, and the use of PCR tests for human papillomavirus detection in women. “But we need to move on from successful demonstration projects to scale them up to be real policies to be embedded in national health systems”, he notes. PAHO can “support the countries, to offer the possibilities, to adapt them to the national context, to identify the strategic issues that need to be addressed, including the bottlenecks”, Barbosa says.

Alongside continuing control of COVID-19, implementing the lessons learned from the pandemic will be a priority for Barbosa. “The pandemic showed that nobody was prepared to face a health emergency like COVID-19. PAHO has established an independent group that is performing an assessment of the response, and I am totally committed to implement the recommendations of this group in a very transparent way with our member states”, he says. Barbosa also wants PAHO to support “our member states to review and strengthen their national capacities” and “to participate in the global debate about the new pandemic instrument that will be approved in the World Health Assembly next year”. Furthermore, he is keen to capitalise on some of the changes to health-care delivery: “During the pandemic, the use of teleconsulting and telemedicine expanded a lot and, of course, now we can use this to provide remote access to people who live in rural areas, in remote areas. So, all these lessons also need to be implemented.”

Brazilian national Barbosa, whose father and grandfather were doctors, studied medicine at the Federal University of Pernambuco in Recife, Brazil, and trained in public health and

epidemiology at the National School of Public Health, Oswaldo Cruz Foundation in Rio de Janeiro. Public health appealed to him because “you can use public health to transform society, you can use public health to reduce inequalities, you can use public health to provide a better quality of life”, he says. Barbosa gained a Master of Medical Science in 1995 and in 2004 a PhD in public health from the University of Campinas in São Paulo. Running for the top position at PAHO was a natural career step for Barbosa, who first joined the organisation in 2007 as Area Manager for Health Surveillance and Disease Prevention and Control, a post he held until 2010. Since 2018 he has been PAHO’s Assistant Director and in this role he led PAHO’s efforts to boost equitable access to COVID-19 vaccines and to amplify regional capacities to produce medicines and health technologies. Barbosa has held many other high-level health positions, including Director of the National Center for Epidemiology in Brasília, Secretary of Health Surveillance and Secretary of Science, Technology and Strategic Supplies in Brazil’s Ministry of Health, and Director-President of the Brazilian Health Regulatory Agency. However, first and foremost, he notes, “I am a public health physician. I’m a public health worker. I’m not a politician.” Sir George Alleyne, Director Emeritus, PAHO, comments that Barbosa is “a serious competent professional who had a successful career in the Brazilian public health service. He is logical in his approach to problems and has a clear vision of the health problems of the Americas.”

At PAHO, another key priority for Barbosa will be to transform primary health care: “Primary health care in our region is still based on the Alma-Ata priorities, that were very important priorities for that time, 40 years ago. Primary health care is focused only on the mother and child health. We need to keep this, of course, but we also need to provide a more comprehensive package of services at the primary health care level from health promotion to surveillance, to prevention, to diagnosis and treatment of non-communicable diseases”, he says. Primary health care “is the most important pillar of a national health system” to address the complex health situation in the Americas, he believes.

Barbosa is keen to optimise the visibility that PAHO received during the pandemic to champion health and call attention to inequities in Latin America and the Caribbean. “I think that this is the time to transform this attention that we received to be more active, establish a more high-level dialogue with the G20, G7, with all the global forum that we have, to put health at the centre, and health as part of development. We cannot have social development in our region if you don’t have health as an important piece of these processes”, he says.

Udani Samarasekera