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Director's Welcoming Remarks Sabin 20th Anniversary Scientific Symposium

It is a great pleasure for me to welcome you all here today to this important symposium. We are very honored to have with us such a distinguished group at our PAHO home, discussing a subject that I'm sure you know is very dear to our hearts and to our Member States.

Today you will be examining lessons learned from experiences in immunization from around the world. The Region of the Americas has one of the world's most successful records in this field. The Americas has espoused a culture of vaccination and has become a world leader in disease eradication and elimination. We were the first region to eradicate smallpox and polio, and we are in the process of certifying the elimination of measles and rubella. We have also led the way towards the equitable introduction of new vaccines. By March of this year, 17 countries and territories of the Americas had added the rotavirus vaccine to their vaccination schedules, 28 had the pneumococcal vaccine, and 20 had the human papillomavirus vaccine. Today more than 8 in 10 children in the Americas live in countries with vaccines against pneumococcal infection, rotavirus and HPV in their regular schedules.

We owe this success to the hard work of immunization advocates like all of you and including our own *Ciro de Quadros*, who pioneered our region's Expanded Program on Immunization. Today, immunization is considered a public good throughout our region. Not only governments but also large sectors of society support immunization. In most of our member countries, it is protected by legislation.

This broad support has been translated into commitments that enable countries to provide quality vaccines free of charge to their populations. A major difference between the Region of the Americas and other regions is that in Latin America and the Caribbean, more than 95% of vaccines are purchased with national funds.

Since 1979, PAHO has supported these efforts through the Revolving Fund for Vaccines, which procures quality vaccines at the lowest price for all PAHO Member States. The Revolving Fund was the brainchild of *Ciro de Quadros*, who did everything possible to make sure his idea would become a reality. More than 30 years later, the Revolving Fund remains critical to the sustainability of our region's immunization

programs. Indeed, our Member States have reconfirmed the Fund's principles of solidarity, Pan Americanism, equity, quality and transparency, and have expressly called on PAHO to continue to administer the Fund as it has for the past three decades.

I also would like to mention just a couple of other components of PAHO's technical cooperation in immunization, because it is an important part of our region's experience in immunization. One is the ProVac Initiative, which builds country capacity for using cost-effectiveness analyses in decision-making regarding the introduction of new vaccines. Another is our work to strengthen regulatory capacity.

In addition, PAHO has also been working with its Member States to promote the use of electronic vaccination records. Some countries have had these types of records for years, while others are well into the development and implementation stage. Member States have made a commitment to share their experiences and work together, which means that the use of digital vaccination records is likely to spread in the Region in the near future, promoting the use of quality data for decision-making at all levels.

In spite of all our achievements in immunization, it is true that half of the more than 15,000 municipalities in Latin America and the Caribbean have vaccination coverage rates of under 95%. To address this, each of our Member States has developed a plan of action to achieve or maintain municipal vaccination coverage at 95% or higher and to strengthen epidemiological surveillance. In this effort, technical support from the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has been key.

In addition to these tangible support for immunization, I cannot overstate the importance of continued work to strengthen health systems and advance toward universal health coverage as a vehicle for increasing immunization coverage in an equitable manner.

Next week, our region will celebrate its 12th annual Vaccination Week in the Americas. Since its inception in 2003, Vaccination Week has grown to become the largest international health initiative in our hemisphere. It has reached more than 465 million children and adults and has helped to keep vaccination high on the political and social agendas.

This year's slogan is "Vaccination: your best shot," encouraging everyone to protect themselves against polio, measles, and other vaccine-preventable diseases in anticipation of the Brazil World Cup.

We are very proud of our region's successes in immunization and of PAHO's role in supporting that success. But we could not have done it without important partners like the Sabin Institute, with whom we have worked closely for many years. In the area of vaccines and immunization, our partnerships with Sabin have been critical to supporting research related to the introduction of new vaccines, strengthening epidemiological

surveillance, and maintaining immunization as a top priority through the establishment of vaccine laws and the support of national immunization technical advisory groups.

Like the Region of the Americas, the Sabin Institute has much to be proud of in its valuable work for a truly noble cause. On behalf of everyone at PAHO, I sincerely congratulate you on your 20th anniversary, and I wish you many more years of success to come.

Thank you!