



**PERMANENT MISSION OF JAMAICA
TO THE UNITED NATIONS**

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS BY

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on

"Women's & Children's Health and Well-Being: Implementing Universal Health Coverage (UHC) and the Amelioration of Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs) in the Context of COVID-19"

on the margins of the 65th session of the Commission on the Status of
Women
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Distinguished delegates,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Good afternoon,

I hope that you, your families and your teams are doing well during these challenging times.

I am pleased to welcome you to this virtual side event on “***Women’s & Children’s Health and Well-Being: Implementing Universal Health Coverage (UHC) and the Amelioration of Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs) in the Context of COVID-19***”. Today’s event is taking place approximately one year after the city of New York became the epicenter of the COVID-19 pandemic within the United States of America, and the global community witnessed the immediate cessation of normal human activity; as we then knew it at any rate. Millions of lives have been lost; I extend sincere sympathies to those who have lost loved ones, and wish a speedy recovery to those who have fallen ill.

The rapid spread of the novel coronavirus continues to put pressure on health-care systems globally, many of which were already under strain prior to the pandemic. This makes the continued pursuit of Universal Health Coverage (UHC) even more critical, as it will foster better outcomes for all.

Progress in the Implementation of the Political Declaration on UHC

While some progress has been achieved over the past decade in expanding UHC, the current rate of progress is woefully insufficient to meet target 3.8 of the Sustainable Development Goals. This aims to achieve universal health coverage for all by 2030. The WHO Director-General’s 2019 report noted that the UHC service index, which measures progress achieved in the coverage of essential health services, had increased from a global average of 45 (of 100) in 2000 to 66

(of 100) in 2017. All regions and all income groups recorded gains. The report noted, however, that in absolute numbers, middle income countries accounted for the largest population lacking coverage of essential health services in 2017. This had implications for countries, such as my own, to effectively deliver on the promise of UHC for all. Additionally, the report urged governments to strengthen health systems to provide UHC, particularly in lower income settings. Noteworthy was the recommendation that these improvements should also address slower gains related to NCDs services.

Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the link to NCDs

That ladies and gentlemen, was the projected course for countries prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Just six months after Member States committed to pursue the ambitious goal of UHC, the world's attention was shifted to curtail the rapid spread of the coronavirus. The pandemic exposed and compounded existing disparities in health based on entrenched inequalities, and increased the risks for those in vulnerable situations. We are especially concerned with the disproportionate impact the pandemic has had on women, as well as the well-being, development and safety of children. The emergency response occasioned by the pandemic has severely impacted fiscal revenues and reduced the ability of developing countries to mobilise health resources at the scale required to meet the magnitude of the crisis at hand. The UN Secretary-General's report, published in November 2020, stated that the pandemic underscored,

“the importance of basic public health, as well as strong health systems and emergency preparedness, for the resilience of a population in the face of a new virus or pandemic, lending ever greater urgency to the quest for universal health coverage”.

Situation at Home

The alarming increase in the number of COVID-19 cases at home [in Jamaica] remains a cause for great concern. The latest figures I have is that our positivity rate, as of today, is at a staggering 31.6%. The rapid increase in these figures means that with each passing day our public health system has to handle increasingly more active cases. The Minister of Health and Wellness in a recent update on the latest developments stated that 59% of our primary care hospitals are at red alert. This means that occupancy levels in their isolation facilities are above 84% capacity.

The COVID19 pandemic has heightened Jamaica's concern with the issue of NCDs. NCDs have been a scourge on our society, with some 70 per cent of Jamaicans suffering from an NCD, including diabetes, hypertension and cancer, in addition to mental illness. The pandemic has exposed multiple links between NCDs, communicable diseases, and health emergencies. People living with NCDs, including cardiovascular disease, diabetes, kidney disease, respiratory disease and conditions including hypertension and obesity, have been shown to be at much higher risk of severe illness and death from COVID-19. It is therefore imperative that efforts be accelerated to strengthen the NCD response, including addressing the longstanding under-investment in NCD prevention and care.

At the national level, we have employed a number of policy responses to address the stress being placed on our public health system as a result of increased levels of hospitalization and the heightened overall demand for general care. These include increases we have made to the bed counts at several hospitals, the hiring of additional staff, stricter enforcement of the policy of non-discrimination, i.e., no one should be turned away from a hospital without being seen, and adjustments we have made in budgetary allocations. Given our limited fiscal space we have reduced planned expenditure in certain activities, in order to free-up resources for the recruitment of additional public health staff. We are also

continuing to actively promote our signature NCDs prevention programme, the Jamaica Moves Initiative, which focuses on individual responsibility.

International Cooperation

Ladies and gentlemen,

Notwithstanding the continuing health and socio-economic impacts of the pandemic on the global community, and the mammoth task ahead of us, we must remain committed to the goal of UHC for all. I can assure you that Jamaica takes very seriously its commitment to the attainment of UHC by 2030. In this respect, we will continue to implement our ten-year strategic plan focused on six strategic goals:

1. safeguarding access to equitable, comprehensive and quality health care;
2. improving leadership and governance;
3. improving health financing for equity and efficiency;
4. mobilising adequate human resources;
5. encouraging social participation and health promotion; and,
6. improving health infrastructure.

At the global level, we underscore the need for a firm commitment to the principles of multilateralism and to the United Nations. Tackling this crisis requires continued regional and international cooperation, as well as collaboration with the private sector, civil society, and other stakeholders. Against this background, I wish to thank Dr. Carll who has been an advocate for maintaining a strong focus on the multidimensional nature of NCDs, and in helping to enhance our discussions on this critical issue.

Thank you.