

Editorial

HEALTH PROGRESS IN THE AMERICAS^{1, 2}

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The Americas are united in their concept of health. Thus health has been defined in the plan for the present decade as "an end for each human being and a means for the society to which he belongs." It is an end in that it enables each individual to realize his potential; rightly it has been said that we are what our genetic inheritance makes us and what our environment allows us to be, according to each person's innate and acquired capacity for adaptation. It is a means because it constitutes a component of development—that is to say, the set of efforts which is directed toward the achievement of social well-being.

The Americas are united in their determination to make health, as it has been described, a reality. With this objective in view, they have identified their problems and set priorities among them, outlined the course of action to be followed in order to solve them or to reduce their deleterious effects, measured the resources available in terms of actual and potential capabilities, and laid down specific targets to be achieved. These latter symbolize the aspiration of the Governments in the Region and motivate their joint action and generous collaboration—not only in times of cataclysm, either natural or provoked by man, but also in the quiet conduct of daily life, with its vicissitudes and satisfactions.

Demonstrating the Americas' unity in health is the intensive interchange of knowledge and experience that characterizes the transfer of technology. Here there is a true intellectual common market, in which every effort is made to assure that the methods and procedures correspond to the precise nature of the problem and are fully in keeping with the peoples' practices and customs, one which stimulates the conscious and active participation of the communities. Where this latter spirit is not manifested with the vigor and continuity that might be desired, it is not because the people have deliberately not wanted to respond but rather because they were not sufficiently motivated.

The Americas are united, too, in aspiring to health as a right for all—an obligation of each individual with respect to the rest—and not the privilege of a few. They seek their own destiny and forge their own progress. Their greatest resources are their spiritual wealth and the capacity of their men and women. For it is a

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Hemisphere that wants understanding but not compassion, that is convinced it has the ability to satisfy its own needs, that would prefer to go about this effort interdependently and with equality, that offers a way of being and of feeling that is revealed in a uniquely emotive approach which, while not losing touch with rational bases, gives tone and color to its behavior and its attitudes.

There is consensus in the Hemisphere that a society's degree of development is reflected in the quality and quantity of its health services. The deficiencies that exist are translated into the continued high frequency of certain diseases and the factors that favor them. Change has come to be the norm for meeting social demand. But what is wanted is change for action, since less is always put into practice than is actually known. The greatest difficulties stem from discontinuity in the political decision-making process, rigidity of structures, administrative deficiencies, and insufficient financing. The health planning process makes it possible to alter these factors so as to obtain optimum yield from resources as they are assigned to priority areas.

The Americas have been united for 72 years through the Pan American Health Organization and for the last 26 years through integration of their work, to a considerable extent, with that of the World Health Organization. The cardinal guiding purpose of these institutions—spiritual in its essence and pragmatic in its execution—has enabled them to pursue their common cooperative task uninterruptedly in this century with total disregard for political considerations, all the Governments being entitled to full membership with equal rights. Even today we are to be enriched by the incorporation of one more republic, the Commonwealth of the Bahamas.

For PAHO and WHO are dedicated to the health and well-being of the peoples of the Americas and to collaborative action in those programs decided on by the Governments, offering their experience to apply what is already known, to investigate what is as yet unknown in search of feasible techniques, or to prepare the necessary human resources.

The Americas are united in their endeavor to solve problems that affect many of the countries in the Region or, indeed, are worldwide in scope. The communicable diseases of man and of animals are historically, culturally, and epidemiologically the most obvious example. Their spread across frontiers and from one region to another through the intensive exchange of persons and of products is a constant challenge for coordinated efforts and for continuous vigilance by the Organization. Proof of their effectiveness is the eradication of smallpox, the liberation of 133.5 million people from the yoke of malaria, and the progressive reduction of other infections, particularly those that affect children under five years of age. However, we have not yet achieved that "critical mass" of actions that will enable us to tip the human-parasite scales in favor of man. The same is true, but with differences in etiology, of the fight against malnutrition, the supply of water and disposal of solid wastes, the elimination of contaminants and other components from the environment, and the development of effective health systems. In the industrialized societies, problems stemming from dependence on drugs, foods, intoxicants, and other substances can only be solved through changes in the behavior of those who are affected. For it is precisely those risks self-imposed by human beings that

operate most significantly in producing ill health. The Hemisphere has similar approaches for dealing with all these situations and the circumstances that flow from them.

The need for a food and nutrition policy, agreed upon by the Governments, to assure the normal growth and development of our children, as well as the physical and intellectual productivity of the adult population, is another essential aspect of American unity. We are aware of the complexity of the undertaking, but we know, too, that it is an inavoidable responsibility. The policy must be formulated on the basis of the biological requirements—in some cases the dire vital necessities—of the people, and not just the mandates of the economy.

The Americas seek to be united through a biomedical and social information network that will make it possible to provide more knowledge to, and better serve, all those whose intellectual curiosity has been stimulated by the doubts arising from their personal experience. Likewise, they endeavor to work together on development of teaching and learning methods, based on educational technology, that will encourage the preparation of outstanding teachers in the countries. It is not a question of standardizing that which is by nature in a constant state of flux, but rather of distilling the more concrete knowledge that is available in order to prepare those who will be responsible for interpreting reality and bringing about well-being.

The Americas are united through a series of centers that are seeking solutions to specific problems—solutions which can be adapted to the diverse situations that prevail. Within these centers the experiences of representatives from the various disciplines are amalgamated and transmitted to professionals who gather there from all parts of the Region. Their work in the service of the Governments extends to all parts of the Hemisphere.

In the field of health the Americas have benefited from technical and financial cooperation, from both public and private sources whose contributions have helped greatly to accelerate social development. Valuable as this cooperation is, better coordination with national investments is needed—all of which must be determined by the Governments themselves.

The Americas are especially united in their common overriding concern with the fate of the 120 million people who do not yet have access to minimum health services. Recognizing their shared responsibility, the Governments are solidly committed to giving genuine meaning to the essentially human purpose that guides them in fulfilling their social trust. For there will be no authentic justice as long as people exist in the Americas who are deprived—through obstacles created by terrain, climate, distribution of income, or the persistence of myths and superstitions—of the benefit of services of prevention and cure.

And so it is that in the field of health the Hemisphere appears to be united in the midst of its diversity. And it is precisely the mandate that this diversity imposes which makes for the quality and the velocity of its progress.

But the Americas must be more strongly united than ever to confront the immediate future, which today appears uncertain because of the sharp imbalance between needs and aspirations on the one hand and resources and investments on the other. If the process of inflation that now plagues us is to continue, its consequences will not long delay in being translated into malnutrition, possible

epidemics of vector-borne diseases, and, in general, greater morbidity and mortality. Those of us who look forward to the future with optimism feel confident that the means will be found to avert any further trauma to those most in need of attention and encouragement in order to realize their potential.

The agenda of your Conference bears witness to the spirit of unity to which I have referred. It includes, first, traditional problems, whose present status shows progress, both in the work accomplished and in greater understanding of the obstacles standing in the way of a comprehensive solution. Other questions have been added with a view to looking ahead to the coming decades, up to the end of the century. Their analysis will help to reaffirm, once more, the commitment to common Hemispheric well-being which inspires the peoples and the Governments and which guides the work of our Organization.

The harmony that has inspired this admirable work in behalf of well-being in the Americas has withstood all manner of vicissitudes and the test of time. For this reason alone it must endure.