

DIRECTOR'S LETTER

ENVIRONMENT AND HEALTH During recent decades, the pursuit of social and economic development has produced significant changes in the environment, which have had both positive and negative impacts on human health. While the gains in well-being brought about by development are noteworthy, the adverse effects are by no means negligible; on the contrary, they can be severe, they cover a broad spectrum of problems, and they are sometimes unexpected. Up to now, policies and decisions about development projects have been made without adequate evaluation of possible adverse environmental impacts on health.

Industry, modern agriculture, and the process of urbanization contribute to contamination of the air, water, and soil with chemical and physical wastes. This pollution is a major environmental health risk factor associated with development, but there are many more: exposure to toxic substances in the workplace, noise pollution, industrial and transportation accidents resulting in disability or death, changes in transmission patterns of communicable diseases due to new exposures to their biological agents, and new disease problems associated with lifestyle changes.

Today we have sufficient technical and scientific knowledge to evaluate the effects of environmental change on health; what is often missing is the political will to systematically apply this knowledge to decision-making. Conscious of this problem, the Pan American Health Organization and the International Development Bank agreed in their 1987 annual meeting to collaborate jointly with the countries in assessing the impact that development-induced environmental changes have on health. The methodology for carrying out this type of evaluation already exists. It can be improved by strengthening the health component of environmental impact assessments in order to identify and predict which environmental modifications may significantly affect human health. With proper foresight and planning, the general objectives of development projects can be achieved while adverse consequences for health are avoided. Collaboration between these two organizations and with the countries of the Region will doubtless contribute to safer and more humane socioeconomic development. □



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