

53rd DIRECTING COUNCIL

66th SESSION OF THE REGIONAL COMMITTEE OF WHO FOR THE AMERICAS

Washington, D.C., USA, 29 September-3 October 2014

CD53/DIV/11
Original: Spanish

**REMARKS BY DR. JAVIER TORRES-GOITIA UPON RECEIVING
THE ABRAHAM HORWITZ AWARD FOR EXCELLENCE IN LEADERSHIP
IN INTER-AMERICAN PUBLIC HEALTH (2013)**

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**29 September 2014
Washington, D.C.**

**53rd Directing Council of PAHO
66th Session of the WHO Regional Committee for the Americas**

Honorable President,
Honorable Ministers of Health,
Distinguished Members of the Diplomatic Corps
Honorable Dr. Anarfi Asamoah-Baah, Deputy Director-General of the World Health Organization,
Honorable Dr. Carissa Etienne, Director of the Pan American Health Organization,
Honorable Dr. Jennie Ward-Robinson, President and CEO of the Board of Directors of the PAHO Foundation,
Esteemed Colleagues,
Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am still astonished. I am assimilating both the surprise and the weight of responsibility conferred by the honor of these two important awards. Such an honor calls for gratitude, and even more, for conduct in line with the legacy of great public health professionals: Abraham Horwitz, Sergio Arouca, and the Pan American Health Organization itself as a pioneering force.

Horwitz, as the first Latin American/Caribbean leader to hold the position of Director (in 1958), oversaw the transition from the classical public health of the early 1900s to a new approach with greater social content that continues to grow in this century. As the newly appointed Director of the Pan American Health Organization, Horwitz warned of a challenge that at the time seemed like a premonition. History since then has shown it to be true and it still is today. He said:

*In many developing countries the greatest challenge to public health is the social environment: too many people barely manage to survive; their work is unproductive, their food always scant, their housing inadequate; their life expectancy short; and their **physical, mental, and social health** deficient and precarious.*

Arouca – a militant political activist and driving force behind the changes that led to health reform and the establishment of the Unified Health System in Brazil – is one of the conceptual fathers of social medicine. He promoted changes that continue to be controversial but fortunately are being adopted.

PAHO, with its team of experts, defends the values now assumed by Dr. Carissa Etienne, a wise and creative Director with widely recognized professional capacity; and Dr. Jennie Ward-Robinson, Director of the PAHO Foundation, which foments progress. We also remember former director Dr. Mirta Roses, who encouraged our work for many years and continues to do so; former WHO Deputy Director-General Dr. David Tejada de Rivero, who together with Mahler was, and who remains today a defender of the true idea of Primary Health Care, which continues to be essential to progress in public health.

I want to offer my sincere gratitude and thanks to Dr. Jesús Antonio Sáez, professor at the *Universidad Complutense de Madrid*. As President of the Ibero-American Association for School and University Health and Medicine, Dr. Sáez took the initiative to submit my name as a candidate for these awards, and, eschewing my skepticism at his plan, he compiled the supporting documentation for my candidacy with the help of my son Javier. It is rare to find a friend, a true friend, who is able to express such profound and impartial solidarity. As for my son, I am accustomed to his loyalty and to sharing common values with him in defense of the right to health.

I do not want to fall into the common place of false modesty. I accept these awards not only as an individual, but more importantly, for an idea shared by thousands of colleagues and millions of humble workers, semi-illiterate *campesinos*, idealistic youth and self-sacrificing women who, when given some power to defend their own health, mobilized to achieve the right to health and remain firmly on that line of social action.

At PAHO, excellence in public health leadership is measured less by cumulative knowledge and more by the changes and outcomes achieved, which are always the product of collective effort. Equally, excellence in universal health care recognizes the importance of care and its **impact** on the people of the Americas and the fact that **the health of all people is essential**, regardless of individual economic and social situations. Such excellence does not refer simply to expanded coverage or technological improvement of services but to their quality, accessibility, and in particular **impact**, which –as our experience resoundingly confirms– depends on including large groups of people who are not simply passive **objects of health treatment**, but instead are **subjects** with their own demands.

Experience has taught us an important lesson:

The concept of the defense of health is understood to be the struggle of people united against hunger, misery, ignorance, and social injustices. This struggle cannot be hierarchically organized from a seat of authority nor provided through actions of a miraculous paternalism on the part of those who were able to become professionals, who, in most cases, distance themselves from and do not join with the common people. It can only occur as part of a united struggle on the part of all marginalized people to improve universal living conditions, in solidarity¹

With this conviction, we have taken clear steps away from the hypocritical, bureaucratic view of public participation, convoking people as cheap labor to reduce costs and expand coverage; we have moved toward the concept of **the health system participating with the people instead of the people with the services.**

Long before anyone ever spoke of “health in all policies” or “social determinants,” the social determinants of poverty-related diseases were already known. The challenge to public health first described by Horwitz has continued for more than 60 years. Thirty years ago, when our small country – Bolivia – recovered its democracy, we learned the value of popular movements for health and awareness spread that health is a right to fight for. This right is not limited to the medical world, but is a part of all human rights considered as a whole. The right to health also obligates the State to fulfill its duty to guarantee health, funding and respecting it as an expression of all human rights and life itself.

In line with these principles, we pursue shared management with public participation based on a democratic and participatory health policy — policy, in the sense of being part of the principle of promoting collective wellbeing, which for us is more important than Weber's concept of the struggle for power. In two months we will be publishing a book on our experiences with these concepts. One experience I can share with you is our surprising finding that those who have less contribute more and are more consistent in their actions. The intense desire to rise out of poverty generates surprising levels of ingenuity and creativity, which is the basis for the concept of popular participation. In developed countries this may be understood as social participation, but in Third World countries the predominant struggle is for social rights, along with an urgent need for this struggle to remain faithful to its goal and not slide down the slippery slope of populism.

¹ Torres Goitia T.J. Bases para la Política de Salud del Gobierno Democrático y Popular. Official edition of the Ministry of Social Welfare and Health. La Paz. Bolivia 1983.

Large groups of people, not always well understood and certainly not respected like they deserve, remain unable to attain their own utopia because of economic greed or unfair use of political power. Their main aspirations are simply to be able to eat a little better, be a little bit better educated in order to work at a higher level, and to enjoy good health. But just as hunger does not lead them to supermarkets, nor do they seek to improve their health in expensive high-tech medical centers. Their hope is that we can figure out how to combine indispensable scientific knowledge with the ethics of solidarity to put into practice health policies that are truly healthy and not based on any outside interests. Health should never be used as a tool for profit or to benefit the interests of any political party.

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