

Editorial

PAHO'S MISSION¹

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Allow me to join you in acknowledging the work accomplished up to now by the Pan American Health Organization, to recall the experiences, at times of almost epic stature, that we have had, and to acknowledge as well the worthy services of the many who have honored and distinguished not only the Organization but also the practice of public health in the Region of the Americas.

This recognition of past triumphs and achievements also provides an opportunity to reflect upon the future. For although what we have accomplished so far is of major importance, I believe it undeniable that we still have much to do. Since in February I shall be assuming responsibility for guiding this institution, in close association with the Member Governments, I should like to take this opportunity to meditate a little about the future.

It has been truly said that we are living at a particularly critical time in the historic development process of the countries in our Region. The economic crisis affecting each of our Organization's Member Governments has much more profound causes than we would wish. The period in which it has fallen to me to lead our institution will most probably be colored by the consequences, characteristics, and effects of this crisis. And the concurrent political crisis, manifested today in conflicts between sister nations, is another matter that calls for reflection. This critical period thus has many implications and consequences, not only for the individual nations involved but for relations among the countries of this hemisphere as well. Nevertheless, it is also true that the difficulties and obstacles that may arise from these times can serve as a stimulus to creative thought, and to the will and determination to create and do.

Clearly, together with the development processes that led to this critical situation have come profound alterations in the health conditions of our peoples and in the institutional, economic, social, and cultural framework within which the solutions to health problems must be sought. The needs of our era, multiplied by this transformation process, are surpassing in their rapid growth and change our Organization's exceptional ability to adapt permanently to new situations. We now confront not only new problems, and not only new manifestations of old ones, but also higher aspirations justified over the years by the many generations whose needs have not been met.

It is to be expected that these problems and aspirations will continue to grow in the years ahead. And it is possible to foresee greater recovery by the historically neglected populations in this Region, to the extent that they can press their demands for better and earlier solutions—which also implies that governments will need to increase their attention, resources, cooperation, effort, and efficiency.

¹From an address delivered as Director-elect on 2 December 1982 in Washington, D.C., at a ceremony commemorating the Eightieth Anniversary of the Pan American Health Organization.

It is within this context of changes, problems, and growing demands that we must think of the future PAHO—not only the PAHO we desire to carry on the glowing tradition of the past, but also the PAHO needed to cope with the new realities already present and those that are yet to come. The Member Governments' unanimous decision defining the goal of "health for all by the year 2000" and approving the strategies and plan of action for attaining that goal constitutes the clearest possible recognition of this obligation to deal with the need for change.

It is from this perspective that we must examine our Organization's basic mission, that of helping the countries to resolve their people's health problems, and must define that mission in a clearer and more workable manner so that we may be guided in selecting the new activities we will need to undertake.

I view PAHO's mission, from a new perspective, as having three major components.

First, I believe that the primary task of the Organization is to manage information and know-how. This is in the sense of promoting, generating, collecting, and analyzing information in a critical manner; disseminating it; and helping the countries to assimilate it and put it to use in solving national problems. In carrying out this task, besides seeking new ways of perceiving and understanding the problems we face, we shall also be searching out appropriate ways of resolving them which are suited to the different conditions prevailing in our countries.

Second, I believe that this Organization's mission can and should be one of mobilizing and using the resources that all of our countries now possess, some more and some less, for the purpose of helping them to help themselves and one another.

Third—and this constitutes the highest justification for the existence of international organizations—there is the mission of contributing to the establishment of peace, understanding, and solidarity for the purpose of achieving well-being for all peoples—peace, understanding, and solidarity that should be regarded as other dimensions of health.

To perform the mission thus defined, we are committed to developing a new action perspective that instead of rejecting past experience will affirm it and build upon it to evolve a new approach that may be described very briefly as "health through cooperation."

That is, to fulfill the mission entrusted to us, we are committed—and this is perhaps our first challenge—to build upon our traditions so as to create an undeniable technical excellence that not only honors the past but ensures respectability and acceptability in the present. This is a prerequisite if the Organization is to discharge its responsibility. Such internal technical excellence must be solidly grounded upon the resources directly administered by the Organization, especially its human resources. It must be based on an attitude of dedication, on a constant concern for the development and improvement of each staff member of this institution, and on a clear awareness of the individual and mutually shared responsibility for accomplishing our assigned mission. To achieve such excellence, the Organization should permit, and will permit, fullest and most effective participation by all; and the Organization should promote, and will promote, the necessary arrangements for the continuing improvement of its technical and support personnel.

Of course, technical excellence cannot reside solely in technological excellence. The great challenges of the future, as well as our very understanding of the nature of health as a product of the historic process of social development, tell us that there can be no technical excellence without prior understanding of the social parameters within which health problems must be solved. Technical excellence also implies making steady progress with a growing operational capacity. Such capacity can always be improved by simplifying bureaucratic processes, by adopting a more effective approach to the

true problems, and by being more flexible in order to deal differently with the diverse contexts and problems that characterize the mosaic of our Region.

Technical excellence also implies recognizing our essential and unavoidable association with the countries of the Region, which must be maintained and strengthened. This must not be a passive relationship; it must be an active and creative association. This does not deny the obligation and need to adhere to national priorities; it does, however, imply a further obligation, derived from the collective mandates, of identifying resources at the Regional level, defining those resources, and focusing them upon the Region's priority needs.

Technical excellence further implies engaging in collaborative activities with other agencies—multilateral or bilateral, governmental or non-governmental, which share common goals, objectives, and interests with us—to improve the health and welfare of the peoples of the Americas.

This new action perspective, this new sense of mission, comes at a time filled with dangers, challenges, and possibilities. Awareness that some of the factors permitting and sustaining the expansion and strength of the Pan American Health Organization in the past are no longer with us, and awareness of the pressures we are likely to confront in terms of reduced material resources, must not lead us to perceive insurmountable obstacles blocking the way to this Organization's objectives. For if we are able to create and implement effective new action mechanisms, if we mobilize each country's potential and utilize it more efficiently, and if we make effective and efficient use of our own resources, we shall indeed achieve our goals.

This, then, is our motivating aim: to build a PAHO that honors the past; a PAHO that ensures fulfillment of its fundamental mission; a PAHO that extends real assistance to the countries in the long-awaited redemption of the enormous social debt almost all of them have accumulated, a debt outwardly manifested in suffering, disease, preventable deaths, and subhuman living conditions; a PAHO that contributes effectively to the improvement of the quality of life for all and that contributes, as well, through its basic pursuit of health, to construction of free and just societies with higher levels of well-being for all; a PAHO that contributes effectively to peace, understanding, and continental solidarity.

With a mission such as this, the difficulties we must confront will become stimuli. And so I am convinced that with the help of those who contribute to the work of this institution, and with the support and efforts of our Member Governments, we can build this new Organization.