
Director's Letter



A NEW WORLD—A NEW CHALLENGE

The international situation has changed with breath-taking speed during the past few years. We have witnessed the demise of a political alignment that shaped international relations for half a century. The end of the "Cold War" brings with it possibilities for a long-awaited new era of dialogue and peace, but it does not signal an end to conflicts. In the configuration that has been called the "new world order" lie the seeds of continuing contention: the economic and, by extension, political competition between the large power blocks of the First World; the persistent and ever-widening gap between rich and poor; the impact of human economic activity on the natural environment; and the resurgence or intensification of nationalist movements, often associated with religious or ethnic radicalism. With the nuclear threat reduced (and, we hope, eliminated) these problems now form the backdrop to international relations. They can lead to greater strife or offer possibilities for increased cooperation and solidarity.

The countries of the Americas face the challenge of beginning a new development process—one that does not repeat the failures of the past and that is guided by the principle of equity. This new development involves not only stabilization and growth of the economy, but enlisting it to serve the welfare of everyone, which in turn requires that democratic participation become a way of life. The new development also requires the countries' effective integration into the international community and thus entails the rapid advance of regional integration. The long-held ideal of cooperation among the countries of the Americas is now more than an aspiration—it is a necessity. Conditions must be created for a permanent and self-sustaining development process that includes an appropriate and effective institutional framework, equilibrium between the exploitation and protection of environmental resources, receptivity to cultural change, capable and well-deployed human resources, and development and utilization of science and technology.

Several important steps in this direction have taken place. High-level dialogue between governments has increased, and concrete initiatives aimed at greater economic integration have emerged. Democratic processes have also advanced, albeit tentatively, resulting in increased social participation. Likewise, environmental consciousness has been raised, and there is growing recognition of the importance of culture, science, technology, and human resources.

But despite important progress, the effects of the economic crisis of the 1980s continue to exact a high human toll. The contribution of the health sector is critical in turning the tide, since improvement in health status is essential to improvement in all of the areas enumerated above.

As demonstrated in our Region, health can be a powerful instrument for encouraging dialogue and cooperation between countries. It is also an essential component of well-being—the central aim of development. In order to play its vital role in the development process, the health sector's organization and functioning must undergo profound and comprehensive changes. At the core of these changes is the fostering of health as an intrinsic element in development and as an object of as well as a contributor to the political process.



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