
Director's Letter



PROPOSAL FOR INVESTMENT IN HEALTH

The cholera epidemic, with its burden of death and suffering, clearly reveals the huge deficiencies in the delivery of essential public services in Latin America. In particular, it betrays inadequacy in the provision of potable water, lack of foresight in the areas of sanitation and waste management, and negligence with regard to epidemiologic surveillance and health care. These deficiencies go hand in hand with the extreme poverty facing 190 million people in Latin America and the Caribbean—more than 40% of the population. Combined with lack of education, poor personal hygiene, and unsafe food handling habits, these factors have allowed cholera to join the list of similarly transmitted diseases that are entrenched in the Region. To understand the magnitude of the enteric disease problem, one has only to remember that year after year diarrhea causes close to 300,000 preventable deaths, mostly of children under five years old.

During the last decade, the gap between needs and existing services has widened owing to reductions in investments in health and sanitation. The advent of this "new" problem—the current cholera epidemic—offers the opportunity to impress upon the leaders of the hemisphere and the world the necessity of a concentrated and sustained long-term effort to correct the deficiencies mentioned above. In addition to emergency efforts to control the epidemic, PAHO, in consultation with other multilateral and bilateral cooperation agencies, and with the collaboration of the Member Governments, is proposing a program of investments in health totalling US\$200 billion over a period of 12 years. Such an investment would enable the countries to achieve the goals that were established for the International Drinking Water Supply and Sanitation Decade, to reduce by at least 50% the deficit in coverage of basic health services in the Region, and to improve significantly the efficacy and efficiency of installed capacity.

The program would be financed as follows: (a) mobilization of internal national resources from all sectors, public and private, to reach a rate of investment of 1.5 to 2% of the gross national product during the next 12 years; (b) assignment to this project of a minimum of 20% of the external financial resources provided by official multilateral or bilateral agencies; (c) negotiation of the possible cancellation of part of the public and private external debt in exchange for investment in health and the environment; and (d) mobilization of a large quantity of international resources as a sign of solidarity.

If realized, this financing scheme would render the proposal feasible. We must act quickly and with determination to alleviate the poverty and the accumulated social debt to which the cholera epidemic so vividly bears witness. Meeting this challenge will require the coordinated efforts of leaders, governments, and cooperation agencies, as well as the effective participation of the people. It must be a labor of all, but it can be done.



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