
Director's Letter



HEALTH, ECONOMICS, AND EQUITY

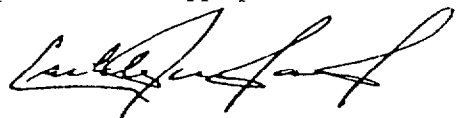
An extraordinary change has taken place in public discourse on health. Increasingly, this subject forms an important theme in political and economic discussions, as recognition broadens that a healthy population is indispensable for sustained economic growth. The recent report of the World Bank on "investing in health," the proposals of the Inter-American Development Bank on social development, and the emphasis on human development in the United Nations Development Program are expressions of this new discourse.

Reform of health care systems has become a political issue not only in the United States—which has one of the most expensive systems on earth—but also in numerous countries in Latin America and the Caribbean. Throughout the Region, reform proposals are being drafted within the context of a moral overhaul of the State and its responsibilities vis-à-vis a new development model.

The moment is propitious for such discussions, as the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean show signs of renewed economic growth and look back on an era during which important conflicts were resolved and advances were made toward strengthening the democratic process and toward subregional and regional integration. Nevertheless, these very changes create new challenges. The health sector can no longer simply wait for decisions regarding overall development policies to be made at other levels, nor simply respond to the deleterious consequences those policies might have for the population's health. We must participate in the dialog about the types of development policies that should be adopted. One guideline is clear: genuine development must be aimed at increasing the well-being of everyone.

This principle—equity—is the first and most important reference point for the definition of policies within the health sector. It is well known that the search for equity is complex and sometimes painful. It is also clearly understood that advancing down that path will require profound changes in the practices and the organization of the health sector and health systems in the countries of the Americas. Moreover, the solutions that apply to countries where the annual per capita expenditure for health care is US\$ 3 000 are not applicable to those in which per capita *income* is US\$ 3 000 or even less, and in which income is concentrated in the hands of a minority of the population. It is each government's responsibility, working with society, to find the appropriate solution for the country's own circumstances. In this process, all sectors, including the private sector, must be mobilized effectively.

For PAHO, the most basic challenge is to participate in defining the Region's development policies. The Organization will continue to provide the information that decision-makers need so that health will be included as an important component of the new development process. Action on health can become an effective mechanism for promoting participatory democracy, the desired development, and the appropriate use of public funds.



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