
Director's Letter



THE TECHNICAL AND POLITICAL DIMENSIONS OF HEALTH

There is a widely held idea among those who work in the public health field, especially the more conservative thinkers, that attention given to health within the general context of development—that is, to the political dimension of health—detracts from technical functions aimed specifically at controlling disease. Those who hold this view would have the health sector concentrate exclusively on its traditional domain: activities related to organizing health services and fighting disease. However, their assumption is mistaken; it denies the intersectoral nature of health, and it also runs counter to the course that public health has taken in the latter half of the 20th century.

Over time the definition of health has changed to reflect more faithfully the complexities of the real world. Health, conceived of as a product of the social environment, cannot be viewed as merely the absence of organic illness, but instead as the comprehensive well-being of human populations. We cannot honor our commitments in light of this current interpretation of health with a work doctrine based on addressing the “specific etiology” or with an outmoded belief in the ascendancy of technical solutions. Our responsibility has become much broader. Without question, the sector must still discharge its technical duties with demonstrated expertise and proficiency. But while it continues to give priority to, for example, combatting communicable diseases, it must also play its rightful role in the process of development, which, unavoidably, involves a political dimension.

The long-term control measures that must be brought to bear against disease cannot be carried out consistently or effectively without a climate of social acceptance, sufficient resources, and efficient legal and administrative support. This means that the conditions required for planning technical activities, carrying them out, and assuring their continuity depend on the formulation and adoption of appropriate policies and its acceptance and execution by all social actors involved. It is PAHO's duty, therefore, to assist the countries in the promotion of such policies. Those who criticize the Organization and the Secretariat for insisting upon a political dimension to health do not realize that when we talk about politics, development, or economics, we are talking about health. Political support and participation in development make it possible for the health sector to offer effective services and perform the work that constitutes its technical expertise. Conversely, able performance of these technical responsibilities is a requisite for the sector to acquire credibility and merit the right to participate in development.

These two dimensions of health—political and technical—are neither incompatible nor contradictory. On the contrary, they are complementary; they must be strengthened at the same time, for they strengthen each other.



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