

DIRECTOR'S

LETTER

DECENTRALIZATION In many countries in the Americas, the sad reality is that large segments of the population continue to lack real access to health services. This situation has been exacerbated by the ongoing economic crisis, which renders the resources available to the health system more restricted than ever. It is therefore crucially important for the countries to use their health sector resources with maximum efficiency in attending to the growing needs of the population. Achieving the goal of health for all through implementation of the primary health care strategy will require comprehensive and profound transformations of the existing health systems in most of the countries. Although each country will have to approach this task in accord with its own characteristics and possibilities, the strengthening and development of local health systems has universal applicability to the basic principles of primary care and health for all.

Strengthening local health systems does not refer simply to dividing up the administrative tasks of the health sector, nor to merely reassigning responsibility for health resources. Further, it is not an isolated phenomenon, for local health systems represent the health sector's response to the processes of democratization and decentralization that are taking place throughout the Region. Decentralization is essentially a political process that implies a change in the use and distribution of power—within a sector or in society as a whole. As such, it requires a firm political decision to transfer financial, human, technological, and other resources. Decentralization does not mean the dissolution or atomization of the health system. When properly developed, local health systems will strengthen the whole by enabling its constituent parts to operate more effectively and with complementarity.

A local health system must bring together all the existing health resources in a given area so that they will be used more effectively and adapted to the local reality. Above all, it must establish a relationship of mutual responsibility with the population it serves. This relationship should be manifested in all aspects of individual and public health, from establishment of priorities to evaluation of progress. By concentrating on a well-defined population group in a circumscribed area, the local system can promote more active participation of the population in both health promotion and the delivery of services. It also assures the social and administrative accountability that is so essential for achieving efficient and effective services.

On a pragmatic level, decentralization can be viewed as a way to better identify and respond to local needs and improve management of resources. But perhaps more important in the long term, it is an important means of establishing community participation and local self-reliance. Social participation is a key to the development of local health systems and the achievement of equity, universal coverage, and efficiency in health services. □



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