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**REPORT ON TECHNICAL COOPERATION AMONG
COUNTRIES IN HEALTH TECHNOLOGY
PROJECT "CONVERGENCE"**

Division of Health and Development
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REPORT ON TECHNICAL COOPERATION AMONG COUNTRIES IN HEALTH TECHNOLOGY PROJECT "CONVERGENCE"

I. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this document is to give an overview of Project Convergence, describing its origins, objectives, priority areas, and the initial financing required to advance work in these areas.

Project Convergence is a broad initiative for cooperation among developing countries (TCDC), which involves a variety of participants from the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean. The aim is to achieve agreed upon objectives in the area of health, both with regard to technology and productivity, utilizing a common platform.

One goal of Project Convergence is to forge ties between companies and research institutions. In addition to its great social significance, the Project will have a positive impact on the expansion of intraregional trade and trade with third-party countries. In that sense, it is a program with a strong integrationist emphasis.

Bearing in mind the agreements reached at the second Ibero-American, held at Madrid in July 1992, in regard to social and human development, PAHO/WHO, LAES, and IDB are jointly submitting this document on Project Convergence for consideration by the Third Ibero-American Summit, to be held in Bahia, Brazil, on 14 July 1993.

II. OBJECTIVES

The objectives of Project Convergence are to help improve the health sector in Latin America and the Caribbean and to promote the technological development of this sector through agreements for technical cooperation among countries of the Region. More specifically, Project Convergence seeks to activate and strengthen the potential of national institutions for the design and production of technology that is appropriate to the specific health needs of the various populations of the Region and also to contribute to economic and social development.

Convergence seeks to encourage cooperation projects designed to foster international trade, investment for the production of critical supplies, research, and technological innovation, as well as the rational use of existing technology. It promotes international cooperation between industrial and commercial companies, institutions and centers of research and technological development, health services, and government agencies. Finally, it serves these institutions in their efforts to negotiate, plan, and carry out TCDC projects in the area of health technology.

Project Convergence also seeks to incorporate cooperation among countries into the processes of regional and subregional integration under way in Latin America and the Caribbean. Technical Cooperation Among Developing Countries (TCDC) is the mechanism that sustains the operation of Convergence and is a strategy for achieving this incorporation into the processes of regional political and economic integration.

III. PROCESS OF NEGOTIATION AND COMMITMENTS

A. Process of Negotiation

Project Convergence was established in 1990 by agreement of the Fifteenth Regular Meeting of the Council of the Latin American Economic System (LAES), held in August 1989.

In 1990, PAHO/WHO and LAES designed a project known as Technical Cooperation Among Countries for Health Technology Development, with a proposal for financing from the United Nations Development Program, which was approved in 1991.

Pursuant to with Decisions 287, 304, and 319 of the Council of LAES, four subregional meetings were convened by PAHO/WHO, LAES, and UNDP--for the Andean, Southern Cone, Central America, and Caribbean subregions--with a view to identifying concrete opportunities for cooperation and drafting profiles of TCDC projects of interest to the participating countries. These meetings served as forums for preliminary negotiations leading up to the Regional Meeting on TCDC for Health Technology Development, held in Santiago, Chile on 6-10 July 1992.

B. Results of the Negotiations

As a result of the process of negotiations that culminated in the Regional Meeting on Convergence, eight regional priority areas were established, and 56 subregional projects (parts of which will be integrated as components of the regional

proposals) and 406 bilateral agreements were approved. These agreements constitute the Convergence commitments, without prejudice to any negotiations that may be carried out in the future.

C. Commitments and Priorities

The priorities incorporated into the General Plan of Joint Action have been established in accordance with the degree of consensus and support the countries have assigned to each technological area.

- Technological Areas with Regional Commitment

In the negotiations carried out by the countries at the Subregional Meetings and at the Regional Meeting eight areas were identified for the promotion of projects of cooperation among countries at regional level:

- Vaccines
- Health Technology Information Systems
- Education in the Administration of Research and Technology Management
- Harmonization of Regulations and Technical Standards
- Medical and Hospital Equipment and Devices
- Medicinal Plants
- Sanitation and Environmental Protection
- Orthoses, Prostheses, and Rehabilitation

- Technological Areas with Subregional Commitments

Projects were negotiated at subregional level in eight additional areas:

- Biologicals
- Oral Health
- Drugs
- Food/Nutrition
- Workers' Health
- Epidemiological Surveillance
- Blood Products
- Osteosynthesis

- Technological Areas with Bilateral Commitments

Six additional areas were the subject of bilateral negotiations, but there has not yet been an opportunity to formulate integrated project proposals. These areas are:

- Local Health Service Technology
- Hospital Technology and its Management
- Marketing of Health Technology
- Cooperation Agreements and Financing
- Hospital and Medical Equipment Maintenance
- Genetics

IV. SUPPORT FOR CONVERGENCE

A. National Agencies of International Cooperation

The national agencies of international cooperation of the countries of the Region, brought together in LAES, conceived the Convergence initiative in keeping with their mission to promote TCDC as a mechanism of integration. These agencies, together with the Ministries of Health, form the base of support for the execution of Convergence projects and serve as focal points for incorporating national health institutions into this effort.

B. Processes of Regional Integration

At the level of the processes of integration there are also opportunities in the realm of policy, commerce, investments, harmonization, and agreements for introducing projects of common interest.

C. Interagency Cooperation

In order to implement the agreements established, the agencies sponsoring the event agreed to create an Interagency Committee on Technical Cooperation Among Countries for Health Technology Development, the members of which would be PAHO/WHO, UNDP, ECLAC, UNESCO, and LAES.

The objective of this Committee is to implement a Plan of Work for Project Convergence, to follow up on the agreements established, and to support the countries in the design and negotiation of projects, as well as to identify sources of financing.

Given the number of projects proposed and the variety of areas they cover, the Interagency Committee has developed a strategy of progressive execution intended to facilitate and ensure the formulation of projects, including the identification of national counterparts, and the search for resources and mechanisms of coordination.

The Committee has held meetings to establish the Joint Plan of Action to support Convergence, and it has reviewed the first master plans in the areas of medical devices, rehabilitation, and medicinal plants.

D. Development Banks

Recently LAES, PAHO/WHO, and IDB agreed to establish a working group to support Convergence. This will make it possible to explore concrete ways of including Convergence under the various lines of financing of IDB. Similar experiments may be tried with other development financing agencies.

E. Official Cooperation of Donor Countries

Project Convergence is designed to facilitate relationships with countries outside the Region through programming that is sufficiently flexible to accommodate activities of joint interest not only bilaterally but subregionally, regionally, and in ad hoc groupings of countries having a shared objective.

Under this modality, donor countries can participate not only through their official cooperation agencies, but also by means of national institutions that may join together to carry out activities in marketing, production, research and development, technological applications in the services, investments, personnel training, information-sharing, and formalization of agreements, "joint ventures", etc., in connection with projects.

F. Centers of Excellence

The Region has institutions of internationally recognized prestige with vision and confidence in the future of Latin America and the Caribbean which have begun to work together on issues relating to scientific and technological development in health. These vanguard institutions are beginning to open new avenues for the introduction, sharing, and dissemination of innovative ideas and proposals.

V. INTERNATIONAL INVOLVEMENT

Convergence is fostering contacts and creating opportunities to expand the involvement of institutions in the Region in discussions on the major issues of concern to the international community with regard to policy on scientific, technological, economic, and social development, including:

A. Harmonization of Instruments

With a view to implementing the proposal for the establishment of a system of free circulation of health-related goods and services, an agreement has been reached to establish a forum for harmonization with the support of the Latin American Integration Association (ALADI). A similar experiment is being initiated with the Central American Parliament (PARLACEN) in order to harmonize legislation relating to the regulation of technology, products, and services. This harmonization activity will be extended to other areas of integration.

Convergence is geared toward facilitating international integration by creating opportunities for participation in efforts aimed at the harmonization of standards, technical norms, regulatory processes, and systems of certification, evaluation and quality assurance for products and services in world forums.

B. Technological Innovation

Innovation, as a process that generates added value and as a strategy of competitiveness, is essential. Project Convergence is opening up opportunities for collaboration by the medical community and its scientific and professional associations, health services and hospitals, universities and scientific and technological centers, and industrial associations with counterparts in other regions, in order to allow these entities to join together in initiatives that will help extend the borders of health technology in the priority areas.

C. Environmental Protection

The effect of technological development on the environment is of growing concern. Projects relating to environmental health technology, medicinal plants, biosafety, and other areas provide opportunities to help create a culture of environmental protection. The Region has abundant and varied flora and fauna and also has a substantial institutional base for supporting concerted actions which will

not only protect the environment but will also generate development and furnish solutions for dealing with health problems of high priority on the world agenda.

D. Equity, Bioethics, and Technology Assessment

The Region can and must face the challenge of health technology development. However, its most outstanding contribution should be the development of a vision of technological progress in the field of health founded on solidarity and the common values of Latin America and the Caribbean.

Technology assessment makes it possible to implement a collective process of scientifically based decision-making to support the formulation of health policies that will ensure the population equitable access to effective and affordable services, thus enhancing world efforts in the area of social development.

E. Emerging Functions of the Modern State

The transition toward societies whose development is based more on the application of knowledge than on conventional production resources makes it necessary to revise the conception of the State and, in particular, its role in health development. Project Convergence offers a forum for reflection on the processes of decentralization, the reform of social security systems, and the emergence of new responsibilities associated with the management of science and technology in economic and social development. In the context of integration processes, these concerns take on an international dimension.

VI. PRIORITY PROJECTS

A. Vaccines

The SIREVA Project, which PAHO/WHO has been promoting, has received financial support from Canada to further the development of new vaccines for *S. pneumoniae*, *N. meningitidis*, typhoid fever, dengue fever, and others. In addition, several countries are fostering ties between their national institutes of health, or the equivalent, as was mentioned in the case of Colombia; that country's critically important work on production of a malaria vaccine is another example of the talent and potential that exist. Such exchanges should be vigorously pursued.

In addition, a situation analysis is being prepared in progressive stages, and for this purpose, an electronic discussion group based in Venezuela has been established in order to facilitate the exchange of information.

The studies and project proposals will serve as a basis for identifying projects that can be presented to various financing agencies. However, it is necessary for this purpose to do some preparatory work in order to be able to define the projects and mobilize the necessary resources on the basis of a strategy of consensus.

B. Medical Devices

Thanks to research carried out by several countries (Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Cuba, Chile, and Mexico) basic information is available on the situation of the production sector and on products, imports, and markets, as well as on the incorporation, use, and maintenance of approximately half a million products currently on the market. In addition to the activities the industrial sector is undertaking in this area, with the leadership of existing associations, three project profiles are being drawn up under the Master Plan that was drafted on the basis of agreements. The first project focuses on the areas of industrial development and competitiveness. The second deals with the incorporation and use of technology by the health services, placing emphasis on the management of the comprehensive technological cycle. The third project is directed toward strengthening research, design, and development of equipment and inputs. To those ends, a group of interested institutions is being established, based in Brazil, which is utilizing electronic communications media to facilitate the exchange of information.

C. Orthoses, Prostheses, and Rehabilitation

In the area of orthoses, prostheses, and rehabilitation, contacts and selective visits have been made to determine existing potential. In this area, a study has been initiated in the Andean Group which should serve as basis for the formulation of one or more projects. At the same time, efforts have been initiated to draw up a proposal in the Caribbean, where the highest priority need exists. Preparatory work is required in this area in order to provide a foundation of knowledge in the short term to support the projects. As with the other projects, a group of interested institutions, based in Colombia, is being established.

D. Medicinal Plants

In the area of medicinal plants, a preliminary review is being carried out, and a directory of the institutions working in this field is being prepared. For this purpose, interaction is being promoted between groups and agencies in order to take advantage of the events that the UNDP, UNIDO, the Amazon Pact, and other institutions have scheduled.

Information will continue to be collected, and the various groups that have been formed will be consulted in order to finalize, by consensus, the project proposal(s), taking into account the various networks, mechanisms, and projects that already exist or are under way. A group of interested institutions, based in Cuba, will also be established.

E. Harmonization of Regulations

The project for harmonization of regulations was assigned high priority in the negotiations, and four initiatives that emerged are to be integrated. Cuba, as agreed in the negotiations, has assumed leadership and is sponsoring a meeting for this purpose.

PARLACEN, in turn, is assuming leadership on the legislative aspects of regulation, and the Brazilian Association of Manufacturers of Medical, Dental, Hospital, and Laboratory Equipment (ABIMO) is organizing a discussion on certification and regulation within Brazil and with other countries of MERCOSUR.

ALADI offers an ideal forum for carrying out the harmonization process and has mechanisms that will permit its effective incorporation into the regulatory systems of the various participating countries. In addition, favorable conditions exist in other regions for progress that will be consonant with the requirements of international markets. A group of interested institutions, based in Uruguay, is being established.

F. Health Technology Information Systems

Specific aspects of information are included under the projects in each area. However, some general projects are being outlined in order to strengthen direct and expeditious communication between the institutions of the various countries. Under this proposal, steps are being taken to set up groups or roundtables for discussion, negotiation, and programming, utilizing the available electronic networks. This project has high priority.

There are plans for other projects, one of which will be initiated on an experimental basis. This project concerns the electronic market for health technology, the purpose of which is to facilitate transactions for products and services between the countries.

In general for each project sources of international information have been identified and conversations have been initiated with these sources in order to obtain overall access. An example would be the data bases containing information on regulations.

G. Technology Assessment

Technology assessment received strong support in the negotiations, and the United Nations General Assembly has recommended that all the agencies promote such activities. Inasmuch as this is an emerging field, a project is being prepared that involves the laying of groundwork, such as: beginning to establish a community of investigators/evaluators; gaining access to information on assessment at the world level; identification of documentary reference centers; training of personnel for technology assessment; and execution of collaborative projects (for example, the Consensus Conference in Colombia); mobilization of research funds; and implementation of actions to support the formulation of technical standards. This project supplements activities that are already under way.

H. Technology for Sanitation and Environmental Protection

Cooperation among urban sanitation companies for the exchange of technologies, the development of sanitation microcompanies, and water quality control and purification technologies are a few examples of the projects that have been negotiated. The long history of work already done in this field by national and international agencies and banks has facilitated rapid progress in the development of the projects negotiated.

Alongside this field of more conventional environmental sanitation technologies, another field has been emerging that involves the development of multiple technologies that are not destructive to the environment, with applications in all fields of endeavor.

It is important to point out that as projects are set in motion in these eight areas, more opportunities will open up for negotiated projects.

Priorities have been established according to the degree of consensus and the support that the countries have assigned to each technological area. Top priority has been given to the regional projects agreed upon, followed by the subregional projects and, finally, the areas where there are bilateral agreements.

VII. FINANCING REQUIRED

In order to give impetus to the development of Project Convergence, it is necessary to prepare a portfolio of projects in the eight areas identified as priority areas; these areas are listed in Section V of this document. In addition, it is essential to prepare a directory of institutions, conduct feasibility studies, and hold events and meetings of coordination in order to spur action in each area.

VIII. CONCLUSIONS

As is evident from this document, Project Convergence constitutes a valuable effort for progress in the development of technology to enhance health. The mechanism of cooperation being utilized--technical cooperation among developing countries (TCDC)--will greatly facilitate the processes of integration contemplated, inasmuch as there is provision throughout the Project for effective interaction among governmental institutions; research centers; NGOs; the private sector, subregional, regional, and international agencies; and donor countries, which imbues the Project with a high degree of participation and comprehensiveness.

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