



Technical

Discussions



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REPORT OF THE TECHNICAL DISCUSSIONS ON ENVIRONMENTAL POLLUTION

The Technical Discussions at the XX Meeting of the Directing Council of the Pan American Health Organization were held on 1 October 1971 at the Headquarters Building in Washington, D.C. The topic was "Environmental Pollution."

In accordance with the Rules for Technical Discussions, Dr. Hugo Victorino Alqueres Batista (Brazil) was elected Moderator and Eng. Joseba A. Lascurain B. (Venezuela) was elected Rapporteur. Dr. Vicente M. Witt (PASB) served as Technical Secretary.

The following technical documents were presented: "Environment and its Relation to Development" by Dr. Carlos Sanz de Santamaría; "Human Health, Human Values and Human Environment" by Dr. John Hanlon; "Determination of Priorities for Action Programs" by Dr. Luis Wannoni L.; and "Health Related Impacts of Environmental Change" by Dr. Leslie Chambers. The guidelines for the discussion were explained by Dr. Vicente M. Witt.

The participants were then divided into two working parties, which elected the following officers: Dr. Bogoslav Juricic as Moderator and Dr. Ernest Mastromatteo as Rapporteur in Group I, and Dr. Héctor Acuña Monteverde as Moderator and Dr. Albert Talboys as Rapporteur in Group II.

Eng. Efrain Ribeiro served as Technical Secretary in Group I and Eng. Edmundo Elmore was Technical Secretary in Group II.

The working parties approved and followed the guidelines for discussing the topic. The views expressed and the conclusions reached by each working party were summarized by their Rapporteurs and consolidated for the preparation of the present Report.

Conclusions

1. The health considerations associated with environmental changes justify representation of the health ministry in all plans for national and economic development, at every stage of development. The governments should give full regard to health interests in coordinating environmental programs and provide legislation to assure that the health ministries will have appropriate authority to exercise their environmental responsibility.
 - a. The ministries of health should operate in environmental programs at several levels: planning, advisory, and normative, including responsibilities for execution of environmental health programs. All health ministries should have organizational components devoted to sanitary engineering and other environmental sciences activities. Environmental health education is essential to the fulfillment of such programs.
 - b. To exercise environmental responsibilities for public health, the ministries of health should have legal authority, facilities, and specialized staff to review and assess health aspects of all development projects.
 - c. Health agencies should exercise their responsibilities for obtaining and reporting to the planning authorities data and information pertinent to the effects of present and prospective environmental changes on public health, and inform private and public institutions. Accordingly, surveillance, monitoring, and research functions need to be developed urgently.
 - d. Coordination of health agencies with others having environmental programs should be accomplished through planning, budgeting and other executive processes, on a local and regional as well as a national scale. International liaison may be developed through PAHO/WHO.
 - e. All development projects should assure participation by the health ministry in the planning, financing, and implementation stages. Budgets should provide funds for health aspects of the projects, on the basis of examination and assessment of the implications to public health.
2. Priorities in environmental programs will vary in nature and degree from place to place according to individual circumstances. A sufficient and accessible supply of safe water and safe disposal of sewage are basic

requirements for human habitation. Beyond this, each country has to establish its own order of priorities both in relation to traditional sanitation problems and the new and emerging environmental problems.

- a. Present methods of establishing criteria for determining priorities should include a systematic and rational analysis of costs, economic needs, and social benefit.
- b. Surveillance and monitoring of health and environmental conditions are needed to develop basic health plans and to guide health operations in national and regional development. Data should include morbidity, mortality, productive life, nutritional status, economic circumstances, social trends, and pertinent demographic data.
- c. To warrant a priority, projects should, on analysis, indicate that benefits outweigh disadvantages. Analyses of proposed projects should make it possible to compare costs and benefits.

3. There was agreement on the insufficiency of available health data and the consensus held that critical appraisals of all data systems and methods should be accompanied by the organization of national data systems compatible with regional systems of measurement described by international agreements and subjected to periodic review and appraisal. Essential parameters include those relating to water quality, water uses, air quality, industrial discharges, nutrition, morbidity, productivity, management of solid wastes, agricultural and industrial production, utilization of natural resources and the influences of transportation and communication.

Criteria and standards for evaluation of environmental conditions can be established and applied as soon as reliable data are obtained. In cases where sufficient data are not yet available prescribed levels of acceptable exposure should be conservative, as the eventual effects may be irreversible.

4. Health ministries will succeed in anticipating future demands for environmental health services to the extent that they foster programs of research, surveillance, monitoring, and epidemiologic studies to provide a sound health basis for such services. These programs should be carried out in collaboration with universities, industries, and other government agencies.

- a. Scientific studies have already established main environmental trends and possible effects on human health. For many of the newer stresses the complex of causes and effects and their interactions are yet to be well defined. This gap in knowledge represents a critical health need.

- b. Countries should exercise their full capacity for applied research to provide the methodology for action programs to improve the environment. At the same time they should pursue vigorously programs of action based on application of knowledge already available.
 - c. Regional centers of human ecology and environmental sciences are important instruments for satisfying environmental needs by assembling and sharing information, providing advisory services, conducting experiments and investigations, and encouraging and supporting research. The centers may assist Member Governments to coordinate and correlate their activities and resources in environmental research.
5. The demands for specialists in environmental health are almost unlimited at all levels, including professionals, technicians, administrators, and field workers. In the highest levels, in positions of leadership, the great need is for generalists and administrators well-schooled in public health, medicine, law, engineering, biology, epidemiology, toxicology, chemistry, economics, and systems analysis.
- a. For the highest and most exacting duties, requiring scholarship and perspective, an academic preparation is considered necessary. Although sanitary engineering education is available in Latin America it needs to be strengthened considerably. The Pan American Center for Sanitary Engineering and Environmental Sciences is an important resource in this regard. Technical instruction may often proceed through in-service training.
 - b. Continuing education is an obligation of environmental agencies, educational institutions and communities at all levels, as only in this way can the staff responsible for carrying out environmental programs be intelligently aware and prepared to meet the demands of a changing environment.
6. All governments should participate in national and international programs to cope with environmental changes.
- a. National governments should develop and adopt criteria and standards; and monitor environmental quality and trends in accordance with their own needs.
 - b. National governments should also collaborate with other nations in considering criteria, standards, monitoring and other activities required to achieve and maintain a quality of environment mutually desirable and necessary for their collective health and well-being.

- c. The development of compatible systems of measurement and data processing, as well as environmental health codes, in addition to serving as a guide for national programs will facilitate the exchange of mutually useful information, and be valuable in attaining the objectives of international agreements.