

MODALITIES OF TECHNICAL COOPERATION IN HEALTH

Introduction

Over recent decades, globalization has posed challenges to a wide range of societies, primarily because of the closer relationships it has prompted between countries and regions. The globalized world in which we now live, with its high degree interdependence and links between countries and regions, not only has political, economic, trade, technological, and environmental repercussions, but social ramifications as well, stemming from such factors as burgeoning human migration across borders for any number of reasons.

In terms of social ramifications, these circumstances have created (and will continue to create) significant health challenges not only at the local and national levels—where the capacity of the State to cope with these challenges and protect the population is often insufficient—but at the regional and global levels as well. One such example is the concern over the rise in certain diseases, as well as the emergence and reemergence of other communicable diseases.

Within this context, continued improvement in sustainable human development indices will call for consolidating efforts at the national, regional, hemispheric, and global levels to address and resolve situations that have resulted from these new trends and their serious impact on health.

The Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), as a specialized public health agency, must continue its role in providing technical cooperation. For more than a century, PAHO has been intimately involved in this area at the hemispheric level through its promotion and coordination of the *“efforts of the countries of the Western Hemisphere to combat disease, lengthen life, and promote the physical and mental health of the people.”*¹

PAHO must continue to support and assist the countries of the Hemisphere in improving health and health surveillance by establishing and strengthening a culture that values people’s lives and health, supporting the creation of optimal environments and living conditions for offering greater opportunities, monitoring environmental conditions to control against risks and threats to public health, and supporting or strengthening optimal, effective, and timely mechanisms that respond to needs and demands as they arise.

¹ Constitution of the Pan American Health Organization, 2001, Chapter I, Article 1.

In light of its important role, and to strengthen its capacity to adapt to changing circumstances, PAHO has initiated a process of reflection for organizational renewal aimed at more effectively and efficiently serving the interests of its member states.

To ensure that this renewal is suited to the changes and challenges ahead, the process must include a series of factors and actors that have played a powerful and significant role in a complex and interdependent scenario in which the State—which designs, implements, and evaluates both domestic policies and those promoted in the various international health forums—remains a *key* actor, but no longer the *only* actor. The current situation obliges us to consider the many public and private actors that have become involved in the field of international health.

In order to improve PAHO's structure and procedures and adapt to the changes and challenges produced by the changes mentioned above, it is necessary to undertake a prospective analysis of technical cooperation in health, seen from different perspectives. These include:

- Innovation and new modalities of hemispheric cooperation
- Country cooperation strategies
- Addressing the gaps between current and future aims in health, and
- Contracting, assigning, and adapting the workforce at PAHO Headquarters and the Representative Offices.

1. Innovation and New Modalities of Hemispheric Cooperation

- To promote effective and timely action, PAHO must become more flexible to continually adapt to changes in the national and international environment. The global socioeconomic, environmental, and political scenarios have varied substantially.
- In recent years, many countries have improved their ability to solve their own problems, which means that they are ever-more demanding in terms of the quality, quantity, and duration of technical cooperation. In contrast, social and health conditions in many countries, rather than improving, have worsened.

- One of the principal challenges of this new international and regional context for PAHO is to strengthen its participation as an active partner in the technical cooperation process with the countries, and to promote cooperation among the countries themselves.
- The concept of **mutual collaboration or cooperation** must be fostered. We all have something to give or to offer, but everyone needs something as well.
- To take advantage of the immense range of public and private actors that have become involved in international health in recent years (academia, international agencies, foundations, etc.), and to heighten the impact and improve the quality of the benefits obtainable for our countries, PAHO should **seek support for countries or provide them with that support to search for strategic partnerships** with key entities or institutions (not necessarily governmental or intraregional). This would complement or even strengthen technical cooperation, to the benefit of the countries of the Hemisphere.
- PAHO could also **help and support countries in identifying, building, and developing their own capacity and strengths**, referred to as “best practices,” and serve as a mechanism for promoting collaboration among countries. This will move the Organization away from a position of providing unilateral cooperation to one of supporting the promotion of these “best practices” among the countries themselves.
- In this way, with support from PAHO, the countries can become not only receivers or beneficiaries of cooperation, but also providers of it and role models for others in areas in which they have been identified as having greater strength or success.
- Gross domestic product (GDP) should no longer be used as one of the mechanisms for **classifying or measuring the well-being of countries**, since it lacks objectivity. Similarly, use of a single classification category (literacy rates, standard of living, maternal or infant mortality indices) should be avoided.
- Traditional methods of **grouping countries**, such as geography, neither represent nor reflect uniformity in terms of the realities or needs of the countries. Despite being part of a single region or subregion, different countries can have different, even abysmal, levels of well-being, which means that their needs may vary greatly as well.
- This heterogeneity makes it necessary to classify countries in terms of different variables, competencies, and needs, and to avoid using a single variable, since each country may be

ahead or behind in a given area, and each has its own needs or challenges, which may be different from or unrelated to the region or subregion to which it pertains.

- As a basis for identifying the extent to which countries have progressed in health, countries and their indicators could be classified on the basis of:
 - The progress made toward meeting the Millennium Development Goals, particularly those related to the health sector
 - Essential Public Health Functions (EPHF)
 - Most vulnerable groups (female heads of household, at-risk children and adolescents, the elderly, indigenous or Afro-Caribbean populations, etc.)
 - Ethnic-cultural origin
 - Groups of countries with weak health sector institutions
 - Groups of countries according to their national budgets for the health sector
 - The quality of the countries' human resources
 - The countries' research capacity.

- At the regional level, it is recommended that other classification elements or topics be included **that match countries and their technical capabilities**, so that successful experiences and best practices can be melded into “networks” (by topic or problem). This will strengthen teamwork, with more regional and sustainable approaches that extend beyond the term of any particular political administration.

- PAHO could provide major support and guidance to the countries in forming these networks and in developing the capacity to put together technical proposals that have strong approaches to particular problems and are specific to the region or country.

- Technical networks backed by PAHO that issue specific recommendations to the countries can greatly facilitate and support the efforts and policies of governments, which in the end are those responsible for decision-making and with whom it is therefore necessary to maintain strong ties. In the future, these networks could perhaps come to serve as authorities on various issues and be recognized as such by the countries and the region.

2. Country Cooperation Strategy

- By evaluating the health situation in each of the different countries, the cooperation strategy could **help to satisfactorily define and plan the cooperation provided by PAHO**.
- The strategy would **help the countries undertake an internal analysis** of their health challenges, weaknesses, needs, trends, critical events, and opportunities, as well as the strengths and adequacy of their national responses or contributions.
- In addition to making it possible to learn about the various country situations, an analysis of this type would facilitate, within the framework of a country's health situation as defined, better allocation or channeling of resources not only from PAHO but from other technical or financial cooperation actors or entities, hemispheric or otherwise.
- The design of the country cooperation strategy should be based upon and take into account the health policies and plans established by each government, which means that the strategy should be developed in close cooperation with the government, and at no time apart from it.
- This exercise can allow for a **broad and profound internal examination** that should include active participation and input from partnerships between the various technical groups involved in health at the country level: government, academia, civil society, development agencies, etc.
- The exercise will give PAHO a better understanding of the particular situation of each country.
- It would be especially useful **to define and target cooperation** toward areas identified as having greater weaknesses and needs, and to come up with solutions pertinent to the contexts of each country, avoiding the direction of efforts toward areas that are already advanced.
- In addition to determining countries' internal weaknesses towards which cooperation should be channeled, the strategies also can serve as an instrument **for defining or identifying the areas where countries are stronger**, or where there could be potential for their own cooperation—in other words, the strategies could help identify the countries' best practices.

3. Addressing the Gaps between Current and Future Aims

- In order to address new challenges or changing situations, it is critically important to visualize:
 - **Where** the country wishes to go
 - **With** what tools
 - **What** needs to happen
 - **Who** will participate, and
 - **What** mechanisms would be the most appropriate to meet the goal.
- There are topics that PAHO traditionally has not addressed in sufficient depth or with sufficient consistency at the individual country level. An example might be economic analysis of public health strategies. Given current trends, it is urgent that such analyses become part of organizational policy. Another example might be the issue of integrated information systems to define public policies and evaluate the effectiveness and efficacy of programs and activities.
- To **give greater impetus and comprehensiveness to the countries' health sectors**, discussions and definitions of health-related topics perhaps must gradually include not only academic and research institutions, civil society organizations, and the media (which provide substantial help with health promotion and disease prevention by fostering behavioral and attitudinal changes), but also Ministries of Economy, Environment, Planning, Education, and even Culture. Including these entities will promote greater sensitivity and awareness of health topics.
- Taking these other determinants and disciplines into account can help to achieve a more integrated concept of health that can promote greater and true sustainable development.
- It is important **that the countries define the role** of their Ministries of Health and health sector institutions, as well as other entities involved, in the monitoring and follow-up evaluations of health system policies and performance in the context of relevant issues such as state reform process and technological change.
- The authorities directly or indirectly involved in health must be provided with the conceptual, methodological, instrumental, and technological frameworks necessary to monitor ongoing or planned policies and actions.

- To achieve all of the above, it is essential to develop human resources for the health sector in order to effectively adapt to the changes already under way, as well as those envisaged in the future.

4. Contracting, Assigning, and Adapting the Workforce at PAHO Headquarters and Representative Offices

- **PAHO Headquarters personnel** should be distributed in a way that better responds to the geographical and epidemiological diversity that PAHO represents at the regional level. It is necessary to seek a balance.
- It is sometimes perceived that in the process of contracting Headquarters staff, there is insufficient consideration of their degree of knowledge about the situation at the country level. Staff at Headquarters either lack or lose a sense of the distinctive needs and characteristics of the different countries. This can result in actions based on an erroneous or altogether mistaken perspective.
- The **profile of the people assigned to the Representative Offices**, as well as their training and experience, should be strictly consistent with the health needs, problems, and challenges identified and prioritized by the countries themselves. In other words, personnel in the Representative Offices must accommodate to the host countries' needs and interests as previously identified in coordination with the PAHO Representative Office.
- In addition to the previously identified needs and interests of the host countries, the existing local technical capacity in the countries, which can vary substantially, must be considered when assigning specialized personnel to the Representative Offices.
- The bulleted items above show that the staffing needs of each Representative Office should in no way be addressed through a "one size fits all" approach, but rather by using standards adapted to each particular country.
- It is important to seek the type of quality and effective personnel that the countries need. Given the diversity and complexity of the issues to be addressed, it is necessary to avoid teams assembled by a small group of countries, which rely in turn on another small group of consultants, whose contributions are often of a general nature, with superficial analyses.

- It is critical that, regardless of the length of their assignment, Headquarters staff or consultants who arrive in the countries be clear that they are going to work and coordinate with local human resources. What must be avoided at all costs are **problems that undermine cooperation** and joint efforts, such as situations in which staff or consultants impose their work or point of view, or underestimate the local technical capacity of the host countries.
 - To head off such situations, it is critical to have a clearly identified and well-prepared counterpart. If there is none, encouraging the creation of such counterparts in the country or institution involved is critical. PAHO can play an important role in making this happen.
 - The **manner in which staff in the Representative Office are assigned** should be more democratic and inclusive. One way to achieve this might be to submit requests for short lists to technical groups and institutions, and then select personnel from those lists. During the process, it is very important not to allow political factors or interests to underestimate existing technical competencies and experience or preclude their selection.
 - The **identification of human resource “competencies”**—understood as the skills, attributes, and behavior closely related to successful performance of the work of the national and international personnel assigned—as well as ongoing evaluation of such competencies—can support the process of contracting, assigning and adapting the workforce in both the Representative Offices and specialized PAHO centers.
 - A permanent evaluation system could be established to **supervise contracted personnel**, particularly short- and medium-term consultants, **and to ensure that they are accountable** for the tasks to which they are assigned. The evaluation would include a survey to assess the performance of all the individuals and agencies—and not just government entities—involved in work associated with the Representative Office.
 - Systems to evaluate performance and to supervise contracted personnel, particularly short- and medium-term consultants, are fundamental to achieving the established goals and objectives. To the extent that the expected or desired results are clearly spelled out to these personnel, they will be properly supervised and accountable for the work that they do.
 - Beyond the evaluation and supervision of the contracted personnel, however, it is also critically important to establish efficient mechanisms to **evaluate, supervise, and monitor the activities supported or carried out** by both internal and external human resources.
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Our countries are increasingly exposed to changes in the environment in which they operate, which is why they should try to reconcile the interests of globalization and the consequences of such complex interdependence with sustainable development.

In conclusion, PAHO must maintain its leadership in the Hemisphere in order to collaborate with the countries and support their efforts to tackle the health challenges stemming from globalization—challenges not only within the countries themselves, but also at the international level.
