

PUBLIC HEALTH CHALLENGES IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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INTRODUCTION

During the closing decade of the 20th century and the dawn of the new century, an extensive debate arose that has yielded an abundance of academic literature on the international public health challenges posed by the new global scenario. The international traffic in goods, services, and people, the integration of economic and trade blocs, and the appearance of emerging and reemerging diseases are some of the factors driving these changes.

This situation has obliged international organizations to explore these challenges and take the necessary steps to adapt their functions, activities, processes, and structures to the demands of an ever-changing world. This exercise is clearly reflected in the reform initiatives undertaken in different agencies of the United Nations and Inter-American systems.

The United Nations Millennium Development Goals clearly identify the specific commitments assumed by the countries of the international community. Attaining these objectives demands additional effort on the part of governments and international organizations alike to meet the public health challenges.

The Pan American Health Organization cannot remain on the sidelines of the modernization processes. It is essential to the survival and adequate performance of our Organization to examine the objectives, problems, and challenges while looking inward to determine the direction we should take in order to meet them.

NEW CHALLENGES AND FUNCTIONS

It is proposed that international health organizations first identify the new challenges that they are facing and classify them so that they can be in a position to rank and redefine their functions, processes, and structures.

The following classification of challenges and functions is suggested as a first step toward achieving a structurally sound PAHO capable of continuing to fulfill the mandate for which it was created more than a century ago:

Challenges for International Health Organizations

International Transfer of Health Risks

- **environmental risks** (destruction of the ozone layer, the greenhouse effect);
- **risks associated with the movement of people across borders** (migrants, tourists, businessmen), among them the international spread of infectious diseases;
- **risks associated with the export of harmful lifestyles;**
- **occupational risks associated with the export of dangerous work processes;**
- **international trade in legal and illegal substances harmful to health, and**
- **risks associated with the export of medical technology** (antimicrobial resistance).

International Trade in Health Services

- **movement of health services across borders;**
- **movement of consumers of health services across borders;**
- **movement of health service providers across borders, and**
- **commercial presence** (establishment of health care units in another country).

Concerning the movement of health service providers across borders, it should be noted that the Region is feeling the impact of the growing export of nurses to the United States and Canada, which have chronic shortages of this type of personnel.

Additional challenges are related to the design of national programs and policies, which will require evidence generated by research or evaluation processes carried out in national contexts but that can be converted to global public goods.

In order to meet these challenges, it has been suggested that international health organizations perform two basic types of functions:

Functions of International Health Organizations

Essential functions

- **promotion of international public goods** (research and development, especially on problems of regional or global importance; information; formulation of norms and standards for national use and for the international regulation of transactions that have an impact on health, and consensus on health policies--the best examples of which are the Declaration of Alma-Ata and disease control efforts), and
- **surveillance and control of international externalities** (timely adequate response to regional and global threats, and control of international risks).

Support Functions

These activities complement functions that are the primary responsibility of national health systems:

- **function as an agency for the unprotected** (populations that are victimized by their own governments; populations of countries that are chronically unable to meet their basic security needs; populations stricken by natural or man-made disasters; vulnerable populations without a national agent to ensure respect for their rights--victims of human rights violations, displaced populations)
- **mobilize resources to assist countries with special development needs** (technical cooperation, development financing).

A NEW PAHO

PAHO must begin to adapt and make fundamental changes if it is to perform the functions identified. This means changing some aspects in the areas of governance and democratization, structural organization, accountability, and transparency.

Governance and Democratization

With respect to the governance of the Organization, redefining the current relationship between the World Health Organization (WHO) and PAHO is extremely important. Unlike the other regional health organizations, our Organization has characteristics that are *sui generis*; although as the Regional Office of WHO, it is part of the United Nations system, it is also part of the Inter-American System, since it was born as a technical cooperation agency for health in the Americas almost half a century before the creation of WHO. Article 54 of the WHO Constitution states that PAHO should be an integral part of WHO. However, there is still much to be done to ensure that the work of the two organizations is coordinated and involves mutual collaboration.

It is of the utmost importance to underscore the need to improve democratization in PAHO. The democratic advances in the Americas should be reflected in the processes of our Organization. The mechanisms for selecting the governing structures at PAHO should be grounded in the basic principles listed below:

- Electoral process exclusive to the Member States
- Equality of circumstances among the candidates
- Transparency and clarity of the commitments assumed by the candidates with the Member States
- Universal, open vote

Transparency and Accountability

The principles of transparency in the management and adoption of objective and efficient accountability mechanisms are fundamental if we wish to have an Organization that is democratic and capable of responding to the demands of the new challenges. Both the governments of the Member States and other international organizations have adopted a variety of measures to promote the appropriate use of economic, material, and human resources and avoid favoring interests that diverge from the Organization's mandate. These measures include the following:

- Make public the financial disclosure statement of PAHO staff members
- Create an office to protect "whistle blowers."
- Establish mechanisms to monitor the countries in terms of the commitments assumed by candidates or staff members

Organizational Structure

It has become necessary to explore whether the Organization's current bureaucratic structures at Headquarters and in the countries are the most appropriate. Regional and country needs and priorities have changed in recent years. This calls for adapting structures and functions to the new realities. It is also urgent to continue making progress in the identification and study of competencies for the human resources of our Organization.
