SEVENTEENTH MEETING OF THE
PAHO ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON MEDICAL RESEARCH

Lima, Peru
2-6 May 1978

THE SPECIAL PROGRAMME FOR RESEARCH AND TRAINING IN TROPICAL DISEASES

- THE ROLE OF THE WORLD BANK -
Parasitic and infectious diseases are a major impediment to the improvement of economic productivity and the quality of life in tropical developing countries. Several of these diseases, notably malaria, and schistosomiasis in association with water development schemes, are showing frightening increases in prevalence and severity. The preventive and therapeutic tools at hand to control the diseases are ineffective, cumbersome and too expensive for widespread use. As costs continue to escalate, application of present control technologies will advance even further beyond the means of the poorer countries. Strategies to improve the socio-economic conditions of the many millions of the poor in developing countries must include disease control, and this requires the development of new and more effective tools.

The current level of research to this end is wholly inadequate. For example, no major new drug for the treatment of any of the tropical diseases has appeared within the past three decades and there are no vaccines. Little money and effort go toward tropical disease research: total worldwide annual expenditure is estimated at US$30 million.

Against this background, and at the request of the 1974 World Health Assembly, the World Health Organization (WHO) drew up a proposal

Prepared for delivery at the XVII Meeting of the PAHO Advisory Committee on Medical Research, Lima, Peru, May 2, 1978.
for a "Special Programme for Research and Training in Tropical Diseases."
The Programme was first presented to a group of governments and international agencies in October 1975. While the objectives of the Programme were endorsed, and a small amount of funds was pledged, the reaction of these potential sources of support made apparent the need to explore further a number of issues related to organization, management and finance. A working group composed of representatives of interested governments and international agencies was set up for the purpose. Staff of the World Bank were invited to participate actively in this planning work, on both the bio-medical and organizational/administrative aspects, which proceeded under the joint auspices of WHO and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the initial co-sponsors of the Programme.

The Special Programme has two principal objectives: (a) to develop and apply effective and low-cost methods to control six tropical diseases -- malaria, schistosomiasis, filariasis (including onchocerciasis), trypanosomiasis, leprosy, leishmaniasis -- and (b) to train scientists and technicians and to strengthen research institutions in the countries affected by the diseases, thus increasing the capability of these countries to deal with the problems. The Programme is global in concept and plan, and every effort will be made to extend its activities to those areas in the world where its purposes and objectives can be served. Technical advances and the development of new research potential may well be achieved in a few years, but the full benefits of disease control will not be realized for at least several decades. The Programme is accordingly planned for 20 years or more.
The WHO is now estimating the Programme's 1978 costs at about $13-15 million, with the annual cost rising to about $30 million when the Programme is fully operational. The Programme is, as you may know, to be carried out by "task forces," one for each of the six diseases. Scientists from technologically more advanced countries will work with scientists from the developing countries. The research will be carried out through a network of existing laboratories and clinical research centers in both tropical and technologically advanced countries -- thus, it can rightfully be expected that a number of such institutions throughout Central and South America will be involved.

In 1976, the World Bank was formally approached by the WHO and UNDP to become a third co-sponsor of this global undertaking. Because the Bank believes the Programme has the potential for producing urgently needed results of great direct benefit to the developing world, it acceded to this request and in November 1977 did, indeed, become a co-sponsor. Moreover, as co-sponsor the Bank is now represented on the Joint Coordinating Committee and the Standing Committee, the two principal policy and managerial organs of the Programme. Of equal importance, perhaps, the Bank has agreed to set up and manage a Tropical Diseases Research Fund, to which governments and others will direct their financial contributions. A fund agreement was signed in March of this year by the respective heads of the Bank and WHO -- and, the Fund is now operative and open for contributions. A letter from WHO has recently gone out to all governments on the official list of addressees of WHO informing them of the Fund's establishment, transmitting a copy of the Fund Agreement, and informing governments how they may make their contributions.
In addition, the Bank is continuing to be a major force in shaping the socioeconomic aspects of the Programme, to which it attaches great importance and which is closely related to its own evolving activities in the health field.

The focus within the World Bank for the Tropical Diseases Research and Training Programme is the Office of Environmental and Health Affairs. The Office will shortly have a staff member handling, on a full-time basis, the Bank's participation in the Programme. Should you have occasion to contact the Bank regarding the Programme, you may write directly to the Tropical Diseases Liaison Officer, Office of Environmental and Health Affairs, The World Bank, Washington, D.C. 20433.

As would be expected, the Bank and PAHO are in continuous touch on a wide range of matters relating to the health sector in the Americas, and this Programme will be no exception.

In conclusion, the World Bank is pleased to have associated itself with this important Programme. For much too long a time the tropical diseases have been the Great Neglected Diseases, and they have exacted a heavy toll both in terms of human misery and as an obstacle to the economic and social development of many tropical countries. First and foremost in this association, however, the Bank is looking for results -- research results that will lead to new and improved tools for preventing and controlling these diseases. The Programme is only the vehicle, the means to that end -- it is you and your colleagues in the laboratories, hospitals, clinics, field stations, universities, pharmaceutical firms and elsewhere that we are counting upon to write a new chapter in tropical medicine.