APPROPRIATE TECHNOLOGY FOR HEALTH

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Development, selection, and use of health technologies appropriate for developing areas constitutes an essential part of today's health strategy for the Americas and for the world. The following address, presented at the 6-10 October Symposium on Appropriate Technology for Health, provides an overview of why such technology is needed and how it can be obtained.

Recently, in the forum of the Pan American Health Organization, the Ministers of Health of the Americas ratified their decision to adopt primary health care as the main strategy to attain the goal of Health for All by the Year 2000. The Ministers reviewed and established the basic components of the strategy that will guide and provide the framework for the efforts that each country individually, and the Region as a whole, will have to make in order to accomplish this noble task. They recognized that vital and far-reaching social, administrative, and technical changes are urgently needed.

In view of the anticipated available resources, the effort required to mobilize resources for this goal is so great that we will need to remain continually alert and to use both wisdom and creativity in order to attain maximum efficiency and effect with every available resource, whether traditional or unconventional. It is evident, from experience gained through the countries' commendable and vigorous efforts to extend the coverage of their health services, that our current approaches and procedures will not suffice to attain our ambitious goal. A recent analysis of the situation indicates that if that end is to be accomplished, and if the countries are actually to attain and sustain the high rates of economic growth for which they strive, then the health sector alone would have to be allocated about 20 per cent of the overall national products anticipated in the year 2000. While these calculations are based on information that is incomplete, fragmented, and not always comparable, they clearly demonstrate the need to redefine our present plans and seek alternative solutions.

Our present knowledge and the technical and administrative procedures now in use must be reviewed and evaluated for effectiveness, productivity, and feasibility with a view to attaining higher levels of health and welfare. We will have to discard those procedures found unsatisfactory, alter those that can be adapted, and devise ones that are lacking. However, our constant examination, testing, application, and evaluation of "best" solutions and innovations to determine their social efficacy will not suffice. We

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must stand ready to cast off deeply-rooted prejudices and to reshape the attitudes and aptitudes of those who deliver the services as well as those who are the intended recipients. Because of the peculiarities that distinguish each country, this essential and paramount task of finding the most effective and efficient ways of attaining our goal must fit perfectly into the particular characteristics and historical continuum of each country. Moreover, the countries will have to cooperate—both indirectly and by exchanging experiences and information—in order to promote the search for the best possible solutions and those solutions’ acceptance and application.

Effective development and proper use of technology is not confined to the sphere of health. Technology’s importance and the extent of its applicability are fully accepted in the world today, and it has become a basic concern of both the highly industrialized countries and those that are seeking higher levels of development. Thus analysis of the beneficial and other consequences of its use has become a matter of utmost priority—particularly for the less-developed countries, which are obliged to obtain the technology available on the international market.

The fact that most modern technological development takes place in the industrialized countries compels the less-developed countries to import it. This makes it incumbent upon them to acquire a fuller understanding of the technology accumulation process in order to find ways to make that process serve the national interest and needs.

One fundamental requirement is for a critical attitude on the part of health authorities and their technical and executive staffs, so that when armed with the necessary methods and instruments they may carry out a process of selection, adaptation, and generation of technology suited to the purpose of obtaining better health for all.

The approach of employing appropriate technology implies a comprehensive, unifying vision. Considered neutrally, in the abstract, technology is neither appropriate nor inappropriate; it only becomes so when applied in a specific manner to concrete situations. Hence its appropriateness is a quality that emerges progressively as salient problems are solved with local resources and capabilities develop so that universal health coverage can be attained with reasonable social efficiency.

These considerations become particularly important in light of the objectives that the Governments view as intrinsic to the goal of Health for All by the Year 2000 and its primary care strategy. These objectives are as follows:

1) to assure the health sector a role in reducing extreme human poverty and inequality;
2) to reorganize and expand the health service systems so that their coverage will be complete, equitable, effective, timely, and socially efficient;
3) to attain intersectoral integration; and
4) to strengthen international solidarity through technical and financial cooperation among the countries in the Region of the Americas, as well as among countries in other regions.

This group [the participants at the 6–10 October Symposium on Appropriate Technology for Health] possesses a wide-ranging body of experience. The delicate task we wish to entrust to you is that of analyzing the possible courses for development of appropriate technology that will favor attainment of these objectives. It is our hope that from this symposium will emerge practical proposals for incorporating this approach into the structure of the national health systems and for taking measures at the international level to support attainment of the goal of Health for All by the Year 2000.
This approach of using appropriate technology for health is a substantially new mechanism through which the countries have been devising, acquiring, and endeavoring to control the use of technology they have come to regard as essential. It does not close the door to importation of technology or industrial development; rather, it seeks to generate procedures that will make it possible to acquire what is most appropriate, to modify and adapt what is needed, and to develop a capacity for devising what local conditions require. One fundamental need is to discard the passively indiscriminate acceptance of external technology. There must be in-depth study of the present technological situation, of how modern technology is accepted and offered, and of the pressures and biased information that are used to induce national authorities to obtain technology of dubious applicability. It is essential to develop ways of acquiring greater control over the technology transfer process so that this process will serve the national interest. It is also urgent that we analyze as well as we can the conditions in our countries that favor development of national technologies, encourage local innovation, and promote reorientation of research toward solutions of practical relevance to current problems.

Creative power and innovative capacity are potential resources that have usually been neglected in our countries. But local innovation and research directed at analyzing problems and finding appropriate solutions constitute the foundation upon which will be built the future technological self-determination of our countries. This innovative and questing attitude must be complemented by a systematic evaluation of results and by development of a system for transmitting information to the various levels at which the process takes place within and among countries.