Central American Subregional Meeting on Theory and Practice of Public Health

The PAHO/WHO project on the development of theory and practice of public health in the Americas (PAHO's Epidemiological Bulletin, Vol. 12, No. 4, 1991), provides, inter alia, for meetings of experts, advisory groups, or workshops to examine the subject and address it at the Regional, subregional, national, or institutional level. It also provides for promotion and support to ensure inclusion of the subject on the agenda in various appropriate forums. These provisions are designed to increase scientific and political awareness about the current status of public health, to target the Region's initiatives in this regard more precisely and appropriately, and to move forward in the definition of strategies aimed at dealing with problem areas and filling in the theoretical, methodological, and operational gaps.

The Subregional Meeting held in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, from 29 to 31 October 1992, attempted to achieve a level of consolidation that would afford a clearer appreciation of the weaknesses, strengths, gaps, and potential opportunities existing in Central America in this social area. It was attended by health service professionals, researchers, and educators from the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Panama, as well as representatives of PAHO/WHO (Program on Health Training for Central America and Panama, Costa Rica, and from Honduras and Washington, DC). It is hoped that its results will help to facilitate, on the one hand, greater discussion about and strengthening of public health practice, and, on the other hand, initiatives to deal with areas that are critically in need of development.

During the meeting a variety of contrasting experiences and opinions were aired that made it possible to have a closer look at the subject of the meeting—namely, theory and practice of public health from various complementary and not mutually exclusive perspectives. These included: the perspective of the university, which sees public health as an area of professional training; that of the services, in which public health is regarded as a mission of the state and its institutions; and the broader perspective, according to which it is seen as a series of efforts designed to achieve a level of consolidation that would afford a clearer appreciation of the weaknesses, strengths, gaps, and potential opportunities existing in Central America in this social area. It was attended by health service professionals, researchers, and educators from the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Panama, as well as representatives of PAHO/WHO (Program on Health Training for Central America and Panama, Costa Rica, and from Honduras and Washington, DC). It is hoped that its results will help to facilitate, on the one hand, greater discussion about and strengthening of public health practice, and, on the other hand, initiatives to deal with areas that are critically in need of development.

The discussions focused on the local level, reaffirming its role in the institutional practice of public health—in other words, in the health of the people. It is at this level, based on policies for comprehensive local development, that health should be seen as an essential component with links to various social actors. It is at this level that the need to break down institutional rigidity and the need for innovative concepts and health practices makes it essential to recapture the intrinsic dynamics of the local situation and take it beyond the bounds of the health sector.

Each of these subject areas was addressed in the plenary sessions. Following a brief introduction of the topic, in each case one of the participants led the group and encouraged the others to react, debate the issues, and examine their own role. This format was interspersed with individual exercises aimed at synthesizing the process based on guidelines that had been provided. The individual exercises were then consolidated by the general rapporteur into an overview of the current situation and trends in public health. In addition, the proposed strategies were consolidated into a single group document.

Public Health Situation and Trends in the Subregion

At first the views about the crisis were polarized: some saw it as an overall expression of the current economic and social model, while others regarded it as an internal public health problem. The various interventions led to the recognition that indeed there is a public health crisis due to causes at the macrostructural level created by political and economic factors that affect the health situation, but that at the same time this crisis is also being aggravated by elements inherent in the historical and social process of health—not only elements that are subject to change but also new elements that may emerge both in the institutional and sectoral dimension and also in the demographic and social dimension.

The term crisis has been understood as a dialectic concept—in other words as a historical situation that generates and/or complicates problems, and also as a dynamic situation that calls for proposals and new alternatives with a view to the future. In this context, questions were raised which contribute to a redefinition of public health.

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There are other health aspects that have an impact at the level of the people. These are the same elements contributing to the crisis which, when seen from the periphery as opposed to the center, make for two entirely different outlooks which have to be understood and
reconciled. In the framework of the prevailing model of development in the Subregion, in which the economic rationale is dominant, the crisis of public health's social role is reflected in the devaluation of health as a right of the people.

For the participants, the constants that characterize the current situation of public health in the subregion are:

- Limited leadership capacity on the part of those who have traditionally been responsible for health in the countries.
- Increasing disparities between health theory, health practice, and the health needs of the population.
- Lack of capacity to analyze the situation.
- A weak economy and precarious health financing.
- Limited capacity of research in health and public health to solve problems and propose alternatives.

In addition, four trends were recognized that will make for basic changes in public health theory and practice:

- Privatization of the services and public health financing.
- Strengthening of the processes of centralization-decentralization.
- Strengthening of social participation within the framework of a growing process of democratization.
- Implementation and development of a process of comprehensive health care.

Possibilities and Options to be Created

The following changes were identified as being necessary, essential, and desirable in order to create the desired image-objective of theory and practice of public health in the Subregion:

- Reduction of the gaps between theory and practice, and between education, the services, and the population.
- Organization of health services within a framework of quality, productivity, and equity.
- Development and democratization of knowledge and epidemiological practice.
- Reconstruction of public health theory and practice based on the problems of life and health that are generated as part of the social dynamic of populations.

- Finally, several elements were defined that should be inherent in any Regional, subregional, national, or local project that seeks to deepen and democratize the debate on public health theory and practice in the context of the structural crisis being experienced in the Region, with a view to keeping projects focused on the improvement of living conditions and the health situation of the population.

- Incorporation, in both the discussion and the practice of national and international health institutions, the importance of health as a right of the people which is indispensable for their development.

- Strengthening of interagency technical and financial support for the processes of reorganization and leadership in the health services.

- Assurance that reorganization of the services will be directed toward equity, effectiveness, quality, and productivity.

- Strengthening of human resources development as a fundamental condition for creation of the new public health practice.

- Implementation of the processes of democratization and social participation in evolution—mechanisms that will make it possible to create a national health undertaking that is truly social.

- Promotion of the administrative development of knowledge to ensure ongoing communication between and within all the countries of the Region and between actors in and outside governments that will make it possible to build Latin American collective thinking in the area of public health.

- Assurance of structural and organizational flexibility in the focus of technical cooperation agencies so that their practice is consistent with a comprehensive approach to health problems.

- Development of leadership and a strategic attitude on the part of health workers in order to ensure the transformation of public health theory and practice.

(Source: Health Manpower Development Program, PAHO.)

A copy of the full report of the meeting may be requested from the PAHO/WHO Representation in Honduras or from PAHO/WHO in Washington, DC.