Reports of the Regional Directors

Report by the Regional Director for the Americas

The Director-General has the honour to present to the Executive Board a report by the Regional Director for the Americas. Should members of the Board wish to see the report of the forty-eighth session of the Regional Committee for the Americas, it will be available in the Executive Board room.
REPORT BY THE REGIONAL DIRECTOR FOR THE AMERICAS

1. The economic situation of the Region of the Americas during 1996 was characterized by modest inflation and modest growth rates, and the economic crises suffered by two major contributors did not spread to the other countries as feared. In spite of continued widespread poverty and inequality that pose a potential threat to political stability, stable democracy is the norm.

2. As part of the evolutionary process of crafting the mission and reviewing the work of the Organization, PAHO/WHO launched an initiative on “Rethinking International Technical Cooperation in Health” (RITCH) to re-examine different aspects of technical cooperation within a process aimed at improving effectiveness. Technical Discussions on the subject were held in March 1996.

3. PAHO/WHO has devoted substantial efforts to establishing relations with new partners, including public sectors other than health, and the private sector. The Technical Discussions of September 1996 focused on nongovernmental organizations: their role, and PAHO relations with them in furthering the goals of health. New efforts have been made to promote interdivisional work directed at improving health policies for action against noncommunicable diseases. The recently established “CARMEN” project (integrated action for the multifactorial reduction of noncommunicable diseases) focuses particularly on cardiovascular disease prevention, but also aims to address the priority areas of cervical cancer prevention and diabetes management.

4. As a follow-up to the Summit of the Americas (Miami, USA, 1994) and to the Special Meeting on Health Sector Reform (Washington, D.C., 29-30 September 1995), PAHO/WHO continues to further activities in the management of health sector reform and in areas related to the organization and financing of health services. PAHO/WHO has pursued advocacy for health at the highest political levels in the countries, meeting with Heads of State, cabinet members, and parliamentarians.

5. Subregional integration efforts are being strengthened, and PAHO/WHO has maintained a strong presence in these discussions. Health is now a topic on the agenda of MERCOSUR, the regional integration movement of the Southern Cone countries which includes Argentina, Brazil, Chile (associate member), Paraguay, and Uruguay. PAHO/WHO has continued to strengthen its technical cooperation in the Central American region, through the continuous mobilization of resources in support of the Central American Health Initiative (launched in 1984 as the Plan for Priority Health Needs in Central America and Panama), through the Central American Integration System and its Social Integration Commission. PAHO/WHO continues to maintain excellent working relations with CARICOM and the newly formed Association of Caribbean States.

6. The United States Department of Health and Human Services has invited PAHO/WHO to participate in the evaluation of “Healthy People 2000” and the formulation of the new policy for “Healthy People 2010”. The Government of Canada has also been stimulated to prepare a policy report on the health of the Canadians. These constitute important efforts directed toward merging the current Strategic and Programmatic Orientations (SPOs) and the renewal of health for all.

7. The Conference on Future Trends and Renewing the Call for Health for All (Montevideo, 9-12 June 1996), at which 17 countries were represented by a total of 115 participants, reaffirmed the renewal of the commitment to achieve health for all. The Conference was jointly sponsored by PAHO/WHO and the Government of Uruguay. It was an expression of improved interregional relationships, with attendance by WHO staff from the Regional Office for Europe, from WHO at Geneva and from the Regional Office for South-East Asia.

8. The topic of renewal of health for all was presented to the Executive Committee in June, and regional policy in this area was approved by the Directing Council meeting in September. The participants suggested
that the new health-for-all framework be used in defining the Organization's new Strategic and Programmatic Orientations for the period 1999-2002.

9. PAHO/WHO has actively pursued the involvement of all Member States of the Region in the evaluation of the current Strategic and Programmatic Orientations and the formulation of new ones. To this end, several countries have formed national groups which have revised the congruence between national plans and the Strategic and Programmatic Orientations, and some have even defined indicators for follow-up on progress.

10. PAHO/WHO has also been working toward providing Ministers of Health with arguments to support the notion that investments in health have a positive effect on subsequent economic growth. The Inter-American Development Bank and ECLAC are joining the Organization in a study which will attempt to demonstrate the relationship between investments in health and economic growth, as well as how investments in health can contribute to the reduction of income inequality. Preliminary findings are showing a correlation between income inequality and such traditional health indicators as life expectancy and infant mortality rates.

11. Efforts to mobilize resources and develop stronger relations with multilateral funding institutions have continued. The Organization has much to contribute to these institutions, not only through its technical expertise, but also because of its presence at the country level, where one of its primary aims is to help countries ensure that funds are well spent. PAHO/WHO is strengthening relations with the private sector and with other parts of civil society such as organized religion and trade unions. The Organization acknowledges the support of the many governments and institutions that made it possible to enhance technical cooperation during 1996.

12. Among the achievements of the technical cooperation programme are the following:

- 1996 marks the fifth year that the Region of the Americas has been free of the wild poliovirus, and, as evidenced by the response to the threat of virus importation which occurred in Canada, the epidemiological and laboratory surveillance systems continue to be strong.

- As of October 1996, the total number of laboratory-confirmed cases of measles for Latin America was 21, compared with 3500 at this time last year. In the Andean region, only 7 cases have been confirmed thus far, and in the Caribbean subregion there have been none. This constitutes a remarkable achievement by the countries of the Americas and it is hoped that it might be possible to certify the Region free of measles at PAHO's 100th birthday in the year 2002.

- The "Healthy Municipalities" movement continues to make progress in Latin America, and is another expression of the commitment of the governments, central and local, to achieving better health for the people. A related venture is the "Healthy Schools" initiative. Both are directly related to the achievement of healthy environments. The regional plan of action on violence and health has been successfully presented to the governing bodies and it is expected to strengthen the commitment of the governments to act forcefully and intersectorally to attack the causes and diminish the consequences of violence.

- The "Declaration of the Americas on Diabetes" has recently been proclaimed in Puerto Rico. This will be used as a launching pad for programme development in the Region. There was representation from governments, nongovernmental organizations, and the private sector, as well as participation by PAHO.

- Good progress is being made in rabies and leprosy elimination in the Americas including the Caribbean.

- PAHO/WHO is proceeding with implementation of the regional plan of action for combating new, emerging, and re-emerging infectious diseases in the Americas, which emphasizes strengthening of surveillance systems.
• Regarding the eradication of Chagas disease, excellent progress has been made in reducing infestation by the triatomine bug in the Southern Cone countries. This has come about as a result of an agreement by the countries to act together.

• PAHO/WHO has continued to develop and maintain a set of “core health data” that will strengthen its capacity to monitor and analyse trends in the overall health situation in the Region.

• Work has advanced on the preparation of the report on the third evaluation and monitoring of health for all by the year 2000. The three volumes of the *Tenth revision of the International Classification of Diseases* were published in Spanish, and subregional workshops were held to train trainers in Spanish- and English-speaking countries. Work has also advanced on the preparation of *Health statistics from the Americas, 1997 edition*.

• PAHO’s ACHR subcommittees on biotechnology, and health systems and services research presented plans of action for the next four years to strengthen research capacity in their respective areas. PAHO’s ACHR supported both plans of action and recommended that external funding sources be explored to finance their implementation. The members also pointed out that PAHO’s ACHR should assume an advocacy role for health research in various forums, increasing its “visibility” among all those involved in the field of research, the community of donors, and the national science and technology agencies, and other ACHR’s.

• A three-month e-mail distance training course in epidemiology and biostatistics was launched in collaboration with the University of Technology in Kingston, Jamaica - the first of its kind ever held in the Caribbean. PAHO/WHO staff developed the course materials and exercises needed to put into practice the concepts presented. Seventeen students participated in the pilot study; instructors, including epidemiologists and statisticians, were located in three sites in the United States and Canada, and there were two local logistics coordinators. The positive outcome of this project suggests that e-mail training can be as successful as traditional classroom instruction.

• PAHO/WHO together with the Carter Center, hosted a meeting of First Ladies of the Americas on mental health care (Washington, D.C., 27-28 September 1996). Achievements in mental health since the Caracas Declaration were re-examined in a regional meeting held in Panama.

• An international conference on the eradication of foot and mouth disease in the next millennium and its impact on food security and trade, focusing on the Americas, was held in Brasilia, 11-12 July 1996.

• PAHO/WHO has launched a major strategy for marketing its publications through its publication centres and has devoted great efforts to strengthening health sciences information networks, through events like the Third Congress on Health Sciences Information, held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 15 October 1996.

• The Organization’s support for the development of UNAIDS at the country level is demonstrated by the fact that the majority of national “theme groups” are headed by the PAHO/WHO Representative.

• The programme for “gender awareness” training was intensified during the year. Workshops were carried out for staff at PAHO Headquarters and country offices, as well as for national counterparts. Technical cooperation in the area of women, health and development has increased, special attention being given to the topic of violence against women.
• During the year, joint evaluation meetings were held in Antigua and Barbuda, Belize, Brazil, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Jamaica, Mexico, Trinidad and Tobago, and Venezuela, with the purpose of evaluating technical cooperation at the country level.

• In 1996, PAHO/WHO inaugurated Perspectives in Health, a twice-yearly non-technical magazine intended for a general audience and designed to present the human-interest aspects of health. The magazine covers a wide range of public health issues, ranging from historical perspectives about malaria to today’s crises with tuberculosis.

13. In the area of internal management, during 1996, measures for organizational reform were taken in PAHO/WHO in a participatory organization-wide effort whereby all units analysed their essential functions and work objectives in order to propose changes and reductions in view of the financial constraints. Within the Office of Administration, the departments of Budget and Finance were merged, and Procurement was consolidated into one unit with Conference and General Services. In the technical area, the major changes occurred with the disestablishment of the regional plan for investment in the environment and health (PIAS) and the incorporation of its functions into the divisions of Health Systems and Services Development, and Health and Environment.

14. In an effort to develop a more integrated approach between regional and country levels in constructing technical cooperation, country representatives have been selectively attending governing bodies’ meetings at the regional and global levels. A seminar on technical cooperation and development of leadership in health for senior managers of the Organization was conducted with the Center for Health Leadership, Western Consortium for Public Health. The event had three themes: leadership in PAHO, transformational leadership, and leadership strategies in a changing environment. This seminar is the second in a series of events addressing the needs of senior staff in understanding and managing technical cooperation. The Managers’ Meeting held in October revolved around the theme of development of human resources, and staffing the Organization appropriately to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century.

15. A process of streamlining the American Region planning, programming, monitoring and evaluation system (AMPES) was initiated in order to improve the system while keeping the essence of recent developments and practice in adopting the “logical approach to project management” in PAHO.

16. PAHO/WHO has been actively involved in improving evaluation at all levels, and in promoting new administrative practices that reinforce efficiency. Part of this work relates to the project of an internal working group to develop a new performance evaluation system, which will be pilot-tested during 1997.

17. Throughout 1996, the emphasis continued to be laid on working with all Member States to achieve more equity in health, which is one of the major underlying goals of health for all.