Health and economics: two sides of the same coin

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The economic recession of the 1980s and its impact on the quality of life in Third World countries highlighted how important health is for development and how essential it is for concern about public health to feature at the very heart of development policies. The fact is that it is no longer possible to meet the soaring costs of health and the emergence of new risks – such as AIDS – unless health is built in among the priority economic objectives.

Health and development are indissolubly linked, and the era when health tended to rate very low in the list of economic targets is past and gone. But a lot remains to be done; the health care services can no longer be left on their own to face up to those new situations, which must be taken into consideration whenever each country constantly reviews its economic objectives.

It was long thought that technical progress would provide the solution to all health problems. That this is not the case is proved by the impact that environmental degradation has had on human health, by the pandemic of AIDS, by the way the much greater mobility of people has encouraged the rapid transmission of diseases, and by the health consequences of modern life-styles. Today we have to find radically new approaches if we are to avoid the present world situation turning into an uncontrollable health crisis.

It is essential for national policymakers in the field of social welfare to give every citizen much greater decision-making power, especially by ensuring that vulnerable communities have direct access to decisions which concern them. Individuals and communities must be given the opportunity to assume far greater responsibility for their own health and quality of life, by creating a climate that is favourable to well-being and by offering the necessary incentives and support. Independent bodies such as nongovernmental organizations also have an important role to play in making widely available the information and awareness that people must have if they are to make the right choices and take the right social decisions.

This is one of the greatest challenges as we approach the end of the twentieth century. If we show ourselves ready to meet that challenge, the citizens of the third millennium will have the knowledge and the means empowering them to build a society where health – a human right for every man and woman – will be within the reach of all.