

Health promotion: necessary and urgent action in the Americas

Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) are facing an accelerated demographic transition that is combined with a complex epidemiological scenario, in which persistent emerging and reemerging communicable diseases coexist with an increasing burden of chronic noncommunicable diseases, as well as high morbidity and mortality due to traffic accidents and violence.

In addition to strengthening and transforming health systems to achieve effective universal access, the appropriate response to such a challenging situation requires developing a multisectoral agenda that implements policies that can address its key social, economic and environmental determinants, thereby promoting health.

Health promotion has been acknowledged as being an essential component of health systems since the Alma-Ata Declaration (1978)¹ in its historic defense of health for all and, from the movement leading up to the Ottawa Charter (1986)², it elicits a clear strengthening of this field of practice, including its greater presence on the global health agenda.

However, as one looks at the major public health problems in LAC, it is inevitable to acknowledge the need for more decisive action to promote the health of our population in all dimensions of the health sector. Accelerated urbanization without adequate policies has created cities where lack of access to water and sanitation puts millions of people at risk of epidemics of dengue, zika and chikungunya. Tobacco still accounts for tens of thousands of deaths, which could be prevented by adopting legislative and regulatory measures, such as those that have been successfully implemented in Brazil and other countries. The greater prevalence of overweight and obesity requires us to act more swiftly to adopt actions that encourage the option for healthy eating, such as clear labeling that warns consumers about high levels of sodium, sugar or fat, which has already been implemented in Chile and is under discussion in other countries. The alarming numbers of people killed or seriously injured in traffic accidents can be reduced by the adoption of measures such as compulsory safety belts in all seats, helmets for motorcyclists, bans on the use of alcohol by drivers, speed reducers and other measures that can and do save lives.

This year, PAHO is adopting a new health promotion strategy and action plan³, emphasizing the urgent need for the adoption of these and other evidence-based policies that are fundamental for guaranteeing the right to health of the population of the Americas.

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¹ Organização Pan-Americana de Saúde (OPAS/OMS). Washington EUA.

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