

Towards a new equitable, ethical and socially-responsible social compact

[...] an approach based on economic growth motivated by greed has had disastrous consequences that stretch beyond finance and economics. [...] I am not opposed to free trade. Neither do I favor protectionism. I am fully aware of the close ties between greater national and domestic economic prosperity and improved health. But... the market can't solve social problems. Only public health can do that. (Margareth Chan, Director General of the World Health Organization, Istanbul, April 2009).

The ninth Brazilian Conference on Collective Health, between 31 October and 4 November 2009, in Recife, coincided with a particularly turbulent period of recent history. The current international financial crisis has been having a direct impact—unprecedented in recent years—on the health and quality of life of the general public. The Olinda Charter— which came out of this Conference – makes the seriousness of this situation quite clear and proposes that the existing system of production, accumulation and distribution of wealth be overturned and replaced by “a new model that promotes health and quality of life in the context of a sustainable pattern of development conducive to eliminating social inequality.”

Once again, the numbers attending this grand meeting of the Brazilian Association of Post-Graduate Courses in Collective Health (ABRASCO) came as a pleasant surprise and has boosted the determination of this community. In all, 10,731 abstracts were submitted! Of these, the Scientific Commission selected 8,139 studies and experiments to be presented (600 orally and 4,392 in the form of a poster) and 3,147 to be published in the Annals of the Conference—which is a supplement of the Review of Science and Collective Health. The event was attended by more than six thousand participants!!

The main theme was “The Commitment of Science, Technology and Innovation to the Right to Health” and the papers selected and the contributions of a large number of individuals and partner institutions provided a solid basis for the Scientific Commission to design a program that included 4 formal addresses, 12 major debates, 4 talks, 61 panel discussions, 9 themed discussions, and 106 official communications. The four sub-themes – Science, Technology and Innovation for compliance with the principles and guidelines of the Brazilian Public Health System (SUS); Health and Social Security; Sustainable Social and Economic Development; and the Defense of Human Rights – helped organize and stimulate debate and ensure, on the one hand, broader visibility for innovative approaches to the present challenges and, on the other, a review of the concepts and principles recently drawn up on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration Human of Rights; the 30th anniversary of the Alma Ata Declaration and the 20th anniversary of the Brazilian Constitution.

The presence of health professionals, university teachers and field researchers, public health service managers of all levels, including the Minister of State for Health, José Gomes Temporão, community leaders and the active participation of the President of the Republic, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, ensured that there was much debate at the ABRASCO 2009 grand meeting between policy-makers, academics, service-providers and social movements. The focus on Public/Collective Health and on the present national and international state of crisis and its consequent challenges turned the auditoria of the State of Pernambuco's Convention Center into a stage for debating ideas and proposals to defend the health and quality of life of the Brazilian people.

Everyone here knows that ABRASCO grew in strength throughout the 1990s, when the greatest concern in the area of health was to shore up the achievements brought about by the new Constitution and ensure the implementation of the health care management model established by the National Health System. (Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, President of the Republic, during the 9th Brazilian Conference on Collective Health. Olinda, Pernambuco, 3 November 2009).

Based on the historical values defended by the Brazilian collective health community—universality, equity, social participation, democracy and citizenship – the programmed sessions stimulated discussion, reflection and analysis regarding the various issues, including intellectual property, innovations and the right to health,

the impact of the growing role of the judiciary in health and National Health Service management; research ethics and the protection of human research subjects; the challenges of mental health and strategies for overcoming them; agencies and public policies that promote research and education; undergraduate and post-graduate degrees in collective/public health. The necessary linkage between the current economic situation and structural analyses in the field of health has fuelled debate regarding relations between the private and public sectors, the under-funding of the Public Health Service, poor working conditions, healthcare models, primary care and health promotion, the limitations and potential of the Family Health Program; the Growth Acceleration Program and the central role that quality of life and health play in development, responses to neglected diseases and the recent influenza outbreak, the threats posed by global warming, and agro-ecology and food security. These and other issues were addressed from a variety of perspectives.

The fact that the President of the Republic was present at this Ninth ABRASCO conference and the rousing speech he delivered, making reference to the state's mission of guaranteeing the right to health and quality of life for all Brazilian citizens, underlined and renewed the commitment of the Brazilian government to the principles enshrined in our constitution.

We need to know how many State governors are earmarking the 12% of the budget the Constitution requires for health, and how much each city is making available.... If people are building sports facilities with money intended for health, that's a problem. That's why we want to enforce Amendment 29 and it's no easy task. (Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, President of the Republic, during the 9th Brazilian Conference on Collective Health. Olinda, Pernambuco, 3 November 2009).

Though there are obvious new crises and challenges to be overcome, there are also clear opportunities and a need to press forward with the commitments already made to health and quality of life for all. We are confident that the 9th Brazilian Conference on Collective Health—the Commitment of Science, Technology and Innovation to the Right to Health—will have proved to be an occasion that helped to build up a new social compact for a fairer, more ethical and more socially-responsible society.

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