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REGIONAL CENTRE FOR ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH SCIENCES

1. INTRODUCTION

In October 1975, a review of the regional environmental health programme was conducted, with special reference to intercountry activities. One of the main conclusions was that, whereas the programme is progressing satisfactorily and adequate attention is given to water supply and basic sanitation, which hold priority, there appears to be a need to strengthen a number of ongoing activities and to introduce some new ones.

In parallel with these considerations it was reflected that the resources for the programme available in the region could be more fully explored and utilized.

2. TECHNICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The Region as a whole lacks facilities for intensive training courses of short duration for professionals and technicians. Courses on subjects such as operation and maintenance of water systems, water and air pollution control, solid wastes management practices, food hygiene practices, to mention only a few, would prove invaluable.

Baseline and progress data on the environmental health effort are not readily available or are collected irregularly and insufficiently evaluated and disseminated.

Environmental health criteria applicable to the region are lacking, as are standardized methods to make the comparison of data meaningful, especially as concerns quality control.

Applied research is in its infancy and the activities of those institutions engaged in it do not transcend national boundaries. There is a need to develop autochthonous technology for the solution of environmental problems with the limited resources available.

There is ample technical expertise in various fields of environmental health but there is no regional forum where scientists can usefully exchange experience and operate in the best interest of the Region. There is need for a focal point where selected technical and scientific information is made available for consultation and dissemination.

It can therefore be concluded that a regional centre could provide a long-term solution to the present deficiencies.

Participants in two recent regional seminars, on water pollution control, May 1975, and on solid wastes management, February 1976, made a strong plea for the establishment of such a regional facility.

This proposal does not create a precedent. In the American Region, the Centre for Sanitary Engineering and Environmental Sciences (CEPIS) was established in Lima, Peru in 1968. The Centre is very successful in acting as a technical arm of the Regional Office in Washington dealing with such matters as information systems, applied research, training and technical advisory services. Equivalent centres do not exist in other WHO regions but there are institutions, either established or strengthened with WHO support, engaged in a limited number of similar tasks.

3. PROPOSAL

It is proposed to carry out a study in early 1977, to determine the technical and financial feasibility of establishing a centre for environmental health sciences in the Western Pacific Region. A consultant would be employed for this purpose for about two months, with the following terms of reference:

(a) to define the objectives of the Centre and identify the activities in which it should engage;

(b) to outline its modus operandi including its relationship with WHO and with Member States;

(c) to propose a suitable location for the Centre, after analyzing advantages and disadvantages, taking into account the interest of particular Member States;

(d) to plan the phased development of the Centre, including timetable, activities, physical and staffing requirements and an estimate of costs;

(e) to submit sufficient justification and documentation to enable Member States and other donor countries and organizations to plan for technical and financial support.

The Regional Committee is requested to indicate whether this proposal meets with its approval.

4. PRELIMINARY PLANNING

While it is not intended to pre-judge the results of the feasibility study, some preliminary thoughts on matters concerning the proposed Centre are expressed below, in order to give the Committee a more complete picture of what is envisaged.

4.1 Objectives

- To plan and conduct intensive training courses in disciplines relevant to the needs of the Region; to collaborate in the preparation of educational material.
- To collect, collate and disseminate information on environmental health subjects of national, regional and global interest. To collaborate with the WHO international reference networks in this respect.
- To propose methodologies for producing the technical information necessary for planning.
- To adapt or formulate environmental health criteria for regional application.
- To carry out selected applied research studies and assist local research programmes; to test and evaluate new products or ideas.
- To play a leading role in the development, transfer and adaptation of technology.
- To provide technical advisory services and scientific cooperation to Member States, on request, in environmental health engineering and environmental sciences.

4.2 Relationship with Member States and the Regional Office for the Western Pacific

The Centre would be under the general technical and administrative supervision of the Regional Office, but the relationship would be viewed more in terms of a collaborative effort than of line-supervision.

Member States should be able to communicate directly with the Centre when they need services, keeping the Regional Office and the WHO Representatives informed in the interest of programme coordination.

4.3 Location

As the prime purpose of the Centre would be to serve the interests of the developing countries, territories and areas of the Region, it should preferably be located in a developing country. It should be within reasonable distance from other areas of the Region and should preferably be associated with the environmental health agency, or an existing public health institute. Temporary office and laboratory facilities should be available for an early start, until permanent facilities are constructed.

4.4 Physical requirements

A building would be needed containing the necessary equipment, for the administrative and technical staff, for laboratories, a library and workshops and possibly for an auditorium, printing shops and a cafeteria. Adequate outside space should be available for field demonstrations and pilot plants. A tie-in with computer facilities should be considered.

4.5 Staffing requirements

During the first phase, the permanent staff could consist of a director and two or three technical advisers. There should also be an administrative assistant and support personnel with administrative, secretarial, janitorial and other functions.

Some scientific workers could be seconded by Member States on a fixed term basis.

University students could be used to reinforce laboratory and library staff and to participate in research projects.

Other staff would be recruited on a consultant basis, depending upon specific programme requirements.

4.6 Timetable

The report of the feasibility study, which would be conducted in early 1977, should be ready for submission to the twenty-eighth session of the Regional Committee.

Under favourable circumstances, field operation could start in early 1979 and the first phase of the building programme could be completed two years later. The project should be planned for phased implementation, leading to full-scale operations in a period of four to six years from inception.

4.7 Costs and financial support

The feasibility study should include schedules for capital and recurrent expenditures. No revenues are anticipated, although some special services might be provided for a fee. The report of the feasibility study should give all the information necessary to enable Member States and other potential donors to be canvassed for financial support.