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Latin America: Capital Accumulation, Health and the Role of International Institutions

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Ugalde A, Homedes N. América Latina: La acumulación de capital, la salud y el papel de las Instituciones Internacionales. [Latin America: Capital Accumulation, Health and the Role of International Institutions.] Salud Colectiva (Buenos Aires, Argentina) 2007 enero-abril; 3(1): 33-48.

Objectives: This article analyzes the transformation of the health sector during the second half of the twentieth century and presents information on the role that international institutions play in capital accumulation.

Methodology: Analytical and interpretive.

Results: The authors note that although almost all Latin American constitutions guarantee the right of health care for citizens, this mandate has not been met by most countries in question and has been interpreted in ways as diverse as they are limited. The authors present a summary of institutions and international development agencies, outlining their roles in Latin America. They discuss in more detail the actions of the World Bank (WB) and the World Trade Organization (WTO). Finally, the authors examine two policies that they consider important: health reforms and prescription drug policies.

The authors claim that –after the dismantling of the colonial system-- the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank (WB), the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the World Trade Organization (WTO) are the institutions that have supported the accumulation of capital in favor of transnational corporations, and at the same time they have promoted and influenced various health policy and medical reforms in the world.

Conclusions: For Homedes and Ugalde, international institutions that were created to combat poverty and to help developing nations, ended up facilitating and ensuring capital accumulation by transnational corporations. They indicate, for example, that these institutions chose to support aspects of intellectual property rights and the extension of patent exclusivity among other policies contrary to the human right to health.

For the authors, the power to create a true right to health lies not in international organizations, but in social movements.