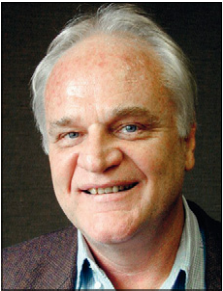


## Profile

### Paulo Buss—a leader of public health and health policy in Brazil



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In the life of Paulo Buss, Director of Brazil's Center for Global Health at the Oswaldo Cruz Foundation (FIOCRUZ), medicine and politics have never been far apart. Their intertwining was evident from his student days in the 1960s when on several occasions he was hauled into jail for protesting against Brazil's military regime. Even his graduation party was an opportunity to protest. "I remember the night perfectly", he recalls. "As the official spokesperson for my graduating class, I spoke about the lack of freedom we had in our university."

Even earlier, as a child in the country's south, Buss had been aware of the important role local doctors had in the community. "I grew up in a small town of 5000 inhabitants and three doctors", he says. As a child Buss experienced at first hand the limits of a doctor's influence. "When I was 6, my younger sister died. I remember the very connected and committed doctor, trying to save her." Buss suspects this experience had an important influence on the path he has taken; by the third year of his medical degree he had moved toward paediatrics, working on a project to help mothers and their babies. "Malnutrition and infectious diseases were major problems across Brazil at the time, particularly among the poor", he says. "Maternal and child mortality was very high. I remember saying to myself 'every day I try to save lives and get better situations for these women but something more can be done with broader interventions, not being limited to treating one woman or child at a time'."

Soon, Buss had decided on a masters degree in social medicine, and in 1976 was appointed to the National School of Public Health, part of FIOCRUZ. "I discovered that public health could be an answer to these questions I was asking myself", he says. At the end of the 1970s, he was part of the blossoming of public health training in Brazil with the public health school setting up a 6-month course in each of Brazil's 27 states. Within a few years, most of those courses had been developed into small schools of public health. Later, the schools were expanded to offer masters and PhD degrees and the country now has more than 40 schools of public health.

The intertwining of medicine and politics became more pronounced during the early 1980s, when Buss and his colleagues saw their main role as participants in the fight for democracy. "Our slogan was that Health is Democracy and Democracy is Health", he says. "We organised a lot of meetings, putting together postgraduate courses in public health, civil society organisations, and so on. We felt it was very important to agree a construct of health as a right." In 1985, Brazil finally freed itself of the military regime and discussions started in earnest about the place of public health in the country's new constitution. 3 years later, social security was enshrined as a constitutional principle, making

it integral to state welfare activities. Buss was at the centre of these events: in 1979, he was appointed Executive Secretary of the Brazilian Association of Collective Health and 6 years later he was elected Deputy Director of the FIOCRUZ National School of Public Health, becoming Director in 1989.

The benefits of Brazil's political commitment to health have become apparent in the past 20 years, says Buss. "Our Healthy Family project covers 120 million inhabitants in 5000 municipalities. There are 32000 family health teams each responsible for 1000 families (or 4000 people): health care, health education, immunisation, access action on local environments." Maternal and infant mortality rates have decreased. As the successes of Brazil's health system became widely known, Buss shifted focus again, to the global arena.

Appointed by the Brazilian President to head FIOCRUZ for two mandates between 2001 and 2008, he was also made the Brazilian Representative at WHO's Executive Board, a board member of the International Association of National Institutes of Public Health, and President of the World Federation of Public Health Associations. "The Brazilian health system has become very well known", he says. "Other countries have not only asked for humanitarian support but also help with the organisation of their health systems. The presence of health in foreign policy has been my main interest since 2003." Buss explains that Brazil is in a prime position to help other countries of the South: "20 years ago we were in the same situation that these countries are experiencing. We can understand their situation." His goal is always for Brazilian expertise to help partner countries achieve real restructuring, he adds. "I don't agree with the idea of small 'projects'. To help build sustainable institutions with committed local people working in them, that is our goal." And taking his focus wider still, Buss has set his sights on a new form of global health governance, reorganising initiatives on health from UN agencies, private foundations, and others. "It's impossible for poor countries to receive so many different missions each week and try to align them all with national policies. We have been working in isolation, there has been a fragmentation in the international arena and within countries."

Now, as he looks back on a long career, Buss reflects on how events steered him into what he calls a hybrid career. "Medicine is policy at the individual level, and policy can be medicine applied to society. I think medicine and society, as well as doctors and politicians, do not have very precise boundaries. There is no precise boundary between my work as a doctor of public health and my work in the field of social policy. This is the field where we can transform the world."

*Stephen Pincock*