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PAN AMERICAN
HEALTH
ORGANIZATION

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WORLD
HEALTH
ORGANIZATION



84th Meeting
Washington, D.C.
June 1980

Provisional Agenda Item 14

CE84/19, ADD. III (Eng.)
4 June 1980
ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

EVALUATION OF THE INSTITUTE OF
NUTRITION OF CENTRAL AMERICA AND PANAMA

A. BACKGROUND

The Institute of Nutrition of Central America and Panama (INCAP), one of 10 PAHO Centers, serves Panama and the five countries of Central America: Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua. The Institute was established in 1949 to study the food and nutrition problems of the area, look for and suggest solutions to those problems, and collaborate with Member Countries in the application of effective solutions. INCAP currently has 39 professional staff, 72 technicians, and 134 non-professional support staff, plus 137 staff on contract. Almost all are located in Guatemala City, in extensive laboratory, clinical and administrative facilities developed during the three decades the Institute has been in existence.

One of the strengths of INCAP has been its insistence on a multi-disciplinary approach to nutrition. Thus food technology, the agricultural sciences and the social sciences are well represented amongst staff members, in addition to more traditional medical and health disciplines.

B. EVALUATION OF THE WORK OF THE CENTER

The role and work of INCAP are being evaluated as part of a more general review of the work of all PAHO Centers, as directed by the XX Pan American Sanitary Conference. The following format is being used:

- a) Self-audit by INCAP Director and his staff;
- b) Review of documents by PAHO Headquarters staff and the Evaluation Team;
- c) Collection of views of Member Countries on the role and value of INCAP;
- d) Site visit by the Evaluation Team; and
- e) Preparation by the Evaluation Team of a report and recommendations to the Director of PASB.

Item (a) was completed in April 1980. A member of the Evaluation Team visited Member Countries and discussed the role and value of INCAP with senior health officials in each during April 1980. A report of these discussions appears in the Annex. The Institute was visited by the Evaluation Team¹ from 28 April to 1 May 1980. The following constitutes the final report of the team.

C. FINAL REPORT

1. After four days of intensive review and discussion, the Team concluded that the services provided by INCAP could not be supplied effectively by individual Member Countries given present and projected states of development in Central America and Panama during the next decade. The Institute has been and continues to be a major technical resource to PAHO and its Member Countries in the area of food and nutrition.

2. The Staff

The Team was favorably impressed by the caliber and competence of those members of the professional staff who were interviewed. Several have outstanding international reputations in their areas of professional

¹The Evaluation Team consisted of Dr. A. Arreaza Guzmán, former Assistant Director, PASB (Venezuela); Dr. T. K. Murray, Food and Nutrition Consultant, Ottawa, Canada; and Dr. A. B. Morrison, Health and Welfare Canada, Ottawa, Canada.

expertise. As will be discussed in Section 4.2 below, the Team noted a high level of frustration and anxiety in senior staff. This appears to be related to uncertainty concerning the role of INCAP, and to anxiety concerning its future, as well as to perceptions that Member Countries are not entirely satisfied with services provided by the Institute.

The majority of the current programs of the Institute are funded by extrabudgetary sources outside of PAHO; there is uncertainty about the continuity of this funding, and many senior staff spend what appears to them to be inordinate amounts of time preparing grant applications and guiding them through the granting process. The financial problems of the Institute are examined in more detail in Section 4.2 below.

Notwithstanding the above-noted concerns expressed by senior staff, the Team was impressed by their motivation and professional dedication. Meetings between the Team, the Director and his professional staff were characterized by candor, frankness, and goodwill. Several of the senior staff are nearing retirement age. The Team was concerned about the availability of suitably qualified replacements who can bring new perspective and expertise into the Institute.

3. Physical Facilities

The physical facilities of INCAP, though utilitarian, are of good quality. The Institute's library represents one of the most complete collections in Latin America as regards nutrition, food science and related fields. Major damage was done by the earthquake in 1976; although extensive repairs have been made, the restoration of facilities is incomplete.

4. The Program of INCAP

4.1 Description

INCAP has a deservedly high reputation as a research institution. Nevertheless, the Team found that many of the Institute's achievements were in non-research areas.

4.1.1 Training

INCAP has played a major role in training nutritionists and related health scientists for the whole of Latin America. Its alumni are to be found in every Latin American country, and in many other institutions outside the Region. The training activities of INCAP represent one of its greatest successes, and are of major value in furthering the aims of self-sufficiency and self-reliance in the Region. Mutually advantageous

relationships have been established with the University of San Carlos in Guatemala, and graduate students are accepted under the auspices of the United Nations University. Training has been provided at three levels. The School of Nutrition provides training in dietetics, public health nutrition, and food science and technology to the bachelors level; graduate programs to the M.S. level also are presented. Shorter certificate courses for physicians, dieticians, dentists and nurses, and training courses for technicians are available. Graduate courses are under preparation in nutrition education and nutrition planning.

The Team noted with satisfaction that the great majority of those trained by INCAP have remained in the field in Latin America. For example, of 111 graduates of the School of Nutrition in the areas of dietetics and public health nutrition, only 17 are not now working in nutrition. Of 34 graduates in food science and technology, all are active in the field.

The Team was pleased to note that in the future a gradual withdrawal of INCAP from the field of undergraduate training is planned as Member Countries develop their own capabilities in this field.

4.1.2 Information Exchange

INCAP carries out some programs of information exchange, including a demonstration multi-crop agricultural production unit located near Guatemala City. Experience gained with this unit should be transferred to similar demonstration projects in other geographic locations in the subregion.

The Team concluded that, despite some success in the area of information exchange, INCAP should strengthen its efforts, and become much more proactive in this important field.

4.1.3 Technology Development and Application

INCAP has many strong programs related to the development of new or improved technology for use in the subregion. Notable successes include the iodization of salt, addition of vitamin A and iron to sugar, and use of coffee pulp in animal rations.

INCAP has been very successful in developing and adapting technology for use in the subregion, due largely to the high level of competence of the professional staff. The Institute has been less successful, however, in having its technological advances accepted by governments and the people of the area. Many of the technical staff appear uncomfortable in promoting the application of their work to Member Countries. This attitude no doubt reflects traditional difficulties of

many scientists in explaining to lay persons the significance of their work and its applicability to the solution of practical public health problems. The staff have tended to be preoccupied with the scientific work carried out in the Institute, and the need to look for new funds for new projects. The Team noted several examples of high-class technological development, the significance of which was clear to INCAP staff but which appeared to be largely unknown to senior management at PAHO Headquarters or to Member Governments.

4.1.4 Planning and Resources Management

Considerable effort has been devoted to assisting the development of food and nutrition policies. Three countries of the subregion (El Salvador Guatemala, and Honduras) have developed food and nutrition policies within central government planning units. The orderly development of programs within these policies is just beginning, and is viewed by INCAP staff as essential to effective collaboration between the Institute and Member Countries. The Institute plans to establish a graduate program in food and nutrition planning for staff of government planning agencies.

4.1.5 Technical Services

INCAP staff can provide a broad spectrum of technical services to Member Governments. Examples of such assistance include analysis of nutrient levels in foods and biological specimens, training technicians to carry out complex analytical procedures, and advice on methodologies for carrying out nutrition surveys. This aspect of the work of INCAP is of high quality, as would be expected from the high degree of technical competence in the Institute. Several Member Governments, however, were of the view that services provided may not reflect national priorities and that there has not been sufficient consultation between the Institute and Member Governments.

4.1.6 Community Participation

The Institute has been active in community participation programs, mostly in Guatemala, including the development of community level agro-industries, a community level primary health care program with integrated food and nutrition components, and community level interventions aimed at promoting positive personal and family health habits. Much of this work is of obvious relevance to the objective of PAHO to achieve health for all by the year 2000; for maximum value it should be extended to other countries served by the Institute. Again, however, the relevance of the work of INCAP in this field, and indeed even the existence of its programs relative to community participation, appeared to be largely unrecognized by PAHO senior management.

4.1.7 Technical Interpretation

INCAP provides interpretation of technical data for Member Countries, including statistical analysis and interpretation of nutrition survey data.

4.1.8 Forecasting

Although surveys of the nutritional status of populations represent a major tool for predicting trends in nutritional health, the Team noted that a major subregional survey was last conducted in 1965. Several countries plan to conduct such surveys, and have recently asked INCAP for assistance. The Team recommended that INCAP place high priority on providing technical cooperation to Member Countries to assist them in assessing the nutritional status of their people. Procedures should be developed which are applicable to conditions in individual countries. It is not clear whether there are systems in place to provide early warning of impending nutritional crises. Certainly INCAP appears to have done little in the fields of socioeconomic forecasting of food availability. Forecasting is an area which must be given additional emphasis in Institute programs, particularly in light of continued pressures on the availability of food occasioned by burgeoning populations and increased energy costs.

4.1.9 The Role of Research in the Program of INCAP

The Team noted the important role research has played in the overall programs of INCAP, and concluded that each of the programs of the Institute requires a research component.

Extrabudgetary funds have been a blessing and a curse to the research program. They have permitted the conduct of a program of research that the core budget would not permit and on occasion have been used to support portions of programs in addition to those known to the granting agencies. This unapproved research, though undertaken with the best of intentions, has muddied the financial waters and has given rise to much concern among senior staff.

The Team noted that in recent years research at INCAP has become better focussed and more relevant to the goals of the Institute. New research proposals now must be approved by the Coordination and Planning Committee (CPC), composed of the Director and his senior staff. The PAHO Country Representatives should be invited to attend meetings of the CPC, so that country priorities can better be considered in planning INCAP programs. Priority in the area of research needs to be carefully developed and scrupulously adhered to. Problems relating to priority setting are discussed in Section 4.2 below.

The Team noted that professional staff at INCAP have had only moderate success in explaining the relevance of their research to PAHO Headquarters and Member Countries. A listing of projects is completely inadequate for this purpose. Problems in the communication process are discussed in Section 4.2.

4.2 Program Management

In general, program management at INCAP is less developed than it should be. Areas of particular concern to the Team are as follows:

4.2.1 Definitions of Program Components

The Team noted that there are no clear definitions of program components. As a result, accurate costing of program components cannot be done and rational decisions about financial balance within the program of the Institute are difficult to make. The Team concluded that development of definitions would probably best be accomplished with outside assistance.

4.2.2 Objectives/Goals/Work Plans

None of these have been adequately worked out, and the mechanisms for doing so are at best fragmentary and incomplete. Much more work needs to be done in this area; outside assistance probably will be required.

4.2.3 Priorities

There is no well-defined process for setting priorities, although in general attempts are made to respond to country wants and needs. There is an urgent need to develop priorities in order to guide the work of the Institute. As a prerequisite, criteria for setting priorities are needed. In discussions with the Director, the Team concluded that Training, Technology Development and Application, Technical Services and Forecasting are or should be considered of high priority, with the other program components of lesser priority. Priorities of INCAP must be in close accord with those of PAHO and WHO.

4.2.4 Financial Controls and Mechanisms

The Team noted that only 16 per cent of the current budget of INCAP comes from WHO, PAHO, or Member Countries. The rest (84 per cent) is of extrabudgetary origin. This excessive reliance on extrabudgetary funds puts severe pressures on INCAP staff. It generates anxieties about the continuity of funding and employment of staff, and necessitates excessive time expenditures by senior staff. As noted above, the problem is increased when research grants are used to support unapproved programs.

In effect, the funding agency tailwags the INCAP dog. This is not to say that extrabudgetary funds should be eschewed. They must, however, be controlled by the mechanism that controls other Institute activities, must be used for the purpose intended, and must not be used to support permanent elements of the Institute. The INCAP dog must wag the funding agency tail.

The Team noted with satisfaction that an experienced administrative officer has joined INCAP staff and day-to-day financial transactions are under control. The present inability to assign costs to program components (Section 4.2.1) must be remedied for proper financial management, planning and allocation of resources to be carried out.

4.2.5 Evaluation Mechanisms

Internal and external mechanisms for the evaluation of the effectiveness and efficiency of INCAP programs and projects require further development. The Team noted with concern that the Technical Advisory Committee had not met regularly for several years. This Committee should provide broad program guidance to the Director of PASB, including advice on INCAP priorities. It must meet on a regular basis. Its membership should be drawn largely from experts in the Latin American area, who represent not only the various disciplines involved in the work of the Institute but also public health and program management. In addition, ad hoc groups of consultants should be utilized for detailed reviews of specific program components and projects.

4.2.6 Communication

Problems of communications with PAHO Headquarters and country staff, as well as with Member Countries, already have been alluded to. An important shortcoming at INCAP has been the failure to close the gaps between science and public policy--between the development of new or improved technology and its application. As a result, the work of INCAP is not well understood by its clients, its contributions are often underutilized, and its worth to PAHO and to Member Countries is undervalued. As a first step towards improving this situation, the INCAP Council should play a more active role as the principal official link between INCAP and governments. Council members should be fully briefed so that they can effectively discuss programs and the transfer of technology. A vigorous advocate for the work of the Institute at PAHO Headquarters would greatly benefit INCAP. New mechanisms must be developed to improve the communication between INCAP and Member Countries. Development of stronger relationships with the Caribbean Food and Nutrition Institute, a sister PAHO Center, would be mutually advantageous.

5. The Future of INCAP

INCAP is an agency with significant strengths and capabilities to contribute in a major way to the work of PAHO in Latin America. On the other hand, it has problems that threaten its very existence. The strengths of the Institute lie in its professional competence, particularly in its capacity to provide first-rate technical training and services, to develop and adapt technology, and to carry out essential research. Perhaps, paradoxically, some of its weaknesses result from traditional attitudes of its strong professional staff--lack of sufficient attention to the details of program management, an inability to articulate clearly the value of scientific and technical programs to lay policy makers, and unwillingness to "promote" programs. But not all of the blame for INCAP's weaknesses can be attributed to internal problems. Its parent organization, PAHO, has neither insisted on sound program management, given firm policy direction, nor provided sufficient funds for the agency to carry out assigned responsibilities without the need to scramble for extrabudgetary funding. Member Countries have, in some instances, paid less than full attention to the need of INCAP for adequate financial support, perhaps because of failure to fully realize what it could or should do for them. Furthermore, the political, social and technical environments in which the Institute operates have dramatically changed over 30 years.

5.1 Alternatives

What then are the alternatives for the future? Clearly there are only three: INCAP can be shut down, it can be left substantially as it is, or it can be changed to respond to the realities before it.

The Team was of the unanimous opinion that INCAP should not be shut down. None of the Member Countries now possesses (nor in the Team's view are likely to possess within the next decade) the capacities to do for themselves what INCAP can do. For many tasks involving technical training or technological development, a critical mass of qualified, dedicated people is required. INCAP has this critical mass, as does no single country served by it. Furthermore, the multidisciplinary strengths possessed by INCAP are likely to be even more required in the future than in the past, as the subregion struggles to achieve self-reliance and self-sufficiency in food and nutrition.

On the other hand, maintenance of the status quo, or something like it, is unacceptable. INCAP's clients are not satisfied, its own senior staff is frustrated, its core budget is insufficient to support a viable organization, and extrabudgetary funds provide an uncertain base. Change obviously is needed.

5.2 Relating Program to Structure

In attempting to relate form and structure to program, the Team considered three models. INCAP could become, in whole or in part, a regional center serving the whole of Latin America; it could remain a subregional center; or it could become a national center under the full or partial sponsorship of one of the national governments, probably Guatemala, since that is where INCAP facilities are located.

In addressing this problem, the Team considered the four high priority program components of the Institute. Each was examined from the point of view of homogeneity of client needs and wants and capacity of a single center to supply adequate services to satisfy such needs and wants, without excessive tailoring to fit the peculiarities of population subgroups. On that basis, it was concluded that INCAP could best provide training on a regional (i.e. Latin American) basis, and the other high priority programs on a subregional (i.e. Central American) basis.

5.3 Maintaining a Multidisciplinary Outlook

The Team was of the strong opinion that the multidisciplinary focus of INCAP provides one of its greatest strengths. Regardless of what changes are made, the ability of the Institute to look at and attack problems in multidisciplinary ways must be retained. To reflect the multidisciplinary orientation, the name of the Institute should be changed to Institute of Food and Nutrition of Central America and Panama.

5.4 Some Implications of Change

INCAP can change successfully only if several prerequisites are met. Program priorities must be established and agreed to by INCAP management, PAHO and Member Countries. Resources required to prosecute high priority programs must be identified and assured of continued funding. The use of "soft" money to augment the activities of the Institute must be controlled by the objectives of the Institute, and the high priority programs should not have to depend on extrabudgetary funds for this prosecution.

This transition cannot be accomplished without changes in program management, including financial management.

6. Major Recommendations

It is the considered opinion of the Team that:

- a) INCAP should be retained as a PAHO Center, with regional (i.e. Latin American) responsibilities for training and subregional

(i.e., Central American) responsibilities for other essential program components. The multidisciplinary orientation and focus of the Institute must be retained. To reflect that orientation the name of the Institute should be changed to Food and Nutrition Institute of Central America and Panama.

b) Major emphasis must be placed on the development of priorities, objectives, goals and work plans, and on improved evaluative procedures and financial controls. Outside assistance may be needed to set such procedures in place.

c) The Director of INCAP and his senior staff, with outside assistance as required, should determine the minimum staff and resources necessary to carry out essential programs and projects within the PAHO program and priorities. Plans should be developed to achieve the desired size of the Institute, within a specified time frame. This can only be done rationally if there is clear understanding on the role and priorities of the Institute.

d) The Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) should meet regularly to provide broad program guidance, including assistance in development of priorities, to the Director of PASB. The TAC membership should include experts in general public health and program management.

e) High priority programs must be assured of continued funding. The possibility that certain community participation programs can be funded through PAHO's primary health care program should be examined, and alternative "hard" funding for essential food technology and food science programs should be sought, perhaps through other international agencies such as FAO. Soft money must be used to augment programs, but must be controlled in the same way as are the core programs of the Institute.

f) Major emphasis must be placed on development within INCAP of the necessary skills to communicate effectively with PAHO Headquarters and client Member Governments. Improved advocacy for the Institute within PAHO would be of great value, and new and improved communications procedures must be developed.

g) Until final decisions are taken on the future of INCAP, PAHO should ensure continuance of the Institute's programs at their present levels.

h) PAHO should review the role of food and nutrition in its overall program, and adjust its structures and policy directives as necessary.

QUESTIONS ASKED

COUNTRY RESPONSES

How do you see the nutrition problem in the country?

The nutrition situation has greatly improved in the last year.

The health authorities are well aware through the studies done by INCAP that there is a serious nutrition problem that affects particularly the rural population.

Have a clear understanding of seriousness of the nutrition situation. Due to the lack of resources they need to plan very carefully how better to use them.

The new government was conscious of the gravity of the problem. There was a nutrition survey made about five years ago but it has not been analyzed yet.

They think that the nutrition situation has improved but they are planning an extensive survey in order to know where they really are and what programs should be carried on.

What are the programs carried on at present?

The nutrition programs are incorporated into the primary health programs.

They have initiated a program to include nutrition in the development of primary health services.

They have developed a strong planning unit in nutrition with the cooperation of health, agriculture and educational sectors.

They give high priority to this problem. They are particularly interested at the moment in the recuperation of the severely malnourished children, which represent more than 10% of the child population.

They are trying to improve the production and distribution of food, but are preparing plans to expand these programs as soon as they have the results of the survey.

Contributions of INCAP in the last five years.

INCAP has contributed by training personnel and advising on some programs on request.

Training personnel and carrying on limited nutrition programs in the rural population.

Besides training personnel, INCAP has helped in the planning process through the visits of experts and assigning a full-time nutritionist.

They did not elaborate on the contributions of INCAP previous to the revolution. Since September last year, INCAP has assigned a full-time medical nutritionist to the country.

They feel they have more resources than the other countries. They have not made requests. Now they would like some advice in the planning and conducting of the nutrition survey.

How useful was this collaboration?

Satisfactory, particularly from the training of personnel at all levels.

Satisfactory, has created an awareness of the problem.

They felt they have received a very important contribution in their efforts to establish a nutrition planning unit.

They felt INCAP has not been responsive to their needs after the revolution.

Very useful through the training of all kinds of personnel in nutrition.

QUESTIONS ASKED

COUNTRY RESPONSES

What would happen if INCAP disappeared?

They are building their own nutrition institutes.

They felt that would represent a serious set-back for Central America.

They would need to recur to other sources for help and advice.

They did not think that it would mean any change at least on short-term basis.

They felt that all Central America and the continent would miss the training capability of INCAP.

Have you any suggestions to improve the services of INCAP?

That they take more into account the needs of the countries.

That the financial problem of INCAP be solved.

It is necessary to increase the human and monetary resources of INCAP.

That INCAP pay more attention to the requests of the countries.

Recognizing the scarcity of resources of INCAP, they think the countries should have a larger participation in the management of the Institute, particularly during the planning process.

Do you think the research program of INCAP makes it difficult to increase the services to the countries?

The research program of INCAP takes most of the time of its personnel.

The research program has made important contributions to the knowledge of nutrition in Central America.

The research program should be oriented to the needs of the countries.

What is important is that the knowledge we have should be applied to improve the health of the countries.

The research program is important to expand our knowledge of the nutrition problems. It should be closely related to the needs and requests of the country.

Where should the experts reside?

They should reside where they are needed.

They should be assigned to the country that requests the services.

In the countries.

In the countries to work as a team with the national.

In the countries.

Have you any suggestion to increase the resources of INCAP?

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That all the countries pay their contributions including the arrears.

That they diversify the sources of funds.

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That they help the countries to prepare well thought, applied nutrition programs in order to get the money to implement them.

For all the countries, they felt that the greatest contribution of INCAP has been the training of personnel at all levels. They thought that that activity should be expanded to include new fields related to the changing needs of the countries, e.g., the nutrition planning process and surveillance system.