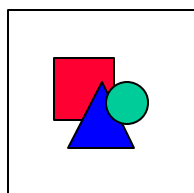


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PAHO RESEARCH GRANTS PROGRAM REPORT

Health Research Coordination
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PAHO RESEARCH GRANTS PROGRAM REPORT

1. Introduction

This report consists of a summary of the main activities carried out and results obtained by the Research Grants Program (RGP) in 1999. In general terms, the activities of coordinating and administering scientific activities are cumulative, creative processes that require constant innovation and, above all, an agile and flexible response to strategic needs for scientific development that cannot be measured in the short run. The Director's Advisory Committee on Health Research (ACHR) has had the opportunity to become acquainted with, analyze, and carry out recommendations related to PAHO technical cooperation in research, and it has been a participating witness in the processes of evolution and change within RGP in its nearly 15 years of operation. This report will concentrate on the activities of the past year; however, it will be necessary to place them in a cumulative, creative *continuum* that characterizes the administration of scientific activities. The reports on RGP presented to the IACHR from its creation to the present time are a demonstration of this process, and these have enabled us to organize and document its results as well as the lessons learned. The operational changes in RGP, as presented to the ACHR in its 1996 meeting, were based on an evaluation over the past ten years; and using said changes as a basis, the ACHR has had a chance in its subsequent meetings of 1997, 1998 and 1999 to get to know and make comments on the advancements made.

In 1997, the RGP report described a process of transition to new policies and modalities, as well as examining adjustments that needed to be made. In 1998, at the Caracas meeting, RGP presented concrete research findings with the presentation of the results of the *Multicenter Study on Violence* (the ACTIVA project). In addition, RGP reported on new projects approved under the new modalities; and the ACHR recommended that RGP carry out a coordinated effort with the technical units and the grantees to promote the publication and dissemination of results. In the 1999 meeting in Washington, RGP was able to show proof of this with the publication of a Special Issue of the *Pan American Journal of Public Health* that presented the findings of the ACTIVA project. RGP also reported on work carried out in the creation and management of the program's website, which places at the disposal of the general public information on the program, its initiatives, competitions, and requirements for grant applications. It should be pointed out that the website has been an important means of facilitating access to program information and publications, which has become evident through a significant increase in the number of applications made by different researchers and users.

In this XXXV meeting of the ACHR in Havana, Cuba, RGP will report on what it achieved in 1999. As such, it gives testimony of the cumulative process and particularly of those processes characterizing its management in a time of increasing maturity and consolidation of new modalities—which in turn characterizes a new model of technical cooperation in research on the part of PAHO Research Coordination. In the Year 2000, RGP will report to the ACHR on the intensification of a strategy of openness and a search for continuous improvement, negotiation, and mobilization of resources with a view to increasing opportunities—utilizing as an instrument for the same special agreements with partners who share common interests.

This document will devote its first section to providing information on the results of the RGP modalities and regular programs; and the second, to the results of the special agreements that make up RGP's most novel component for 1999 in terms of responding to the ACHR recommendations made at its last meetings within a framework of existing policies and resources.

This report and its conclusions are hereby respectfully submitted to the ACHR, with the goal of stimulating discussion among committee members so that they might in turn make recommendations to the Director.

2. Results of RGP Management 1999

The policies and modalities of the Research Grants Program (RGP) continue to be in force and have been reinforced with the development of agreements between PAHO and scientific networks/centers of excellence. The year 1999 can be characterized as one of identifying new partners and mobilizing scientific and institutional resources that will enable us to increase the program's radius of action and to creating more room for interaction among researchers from Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC).

RGP modalities can basically be grouped into two categories, according to their respective emphasis:

1. *Modalities with greater emphasis on training researchers and providing them with opportunities for continuing education*, for which RGP utilizes the following programs as instruments:
 - Graduate Thesis Grants in Public Health (for masters and doctoral candidates).
 - Research Training Grants in Public Health.
2. *Modalities with greater emphasis on producing knowledge*, for which RGP utilizes the following as instruments:
 - Promotion and support to carry out Collaborative Multicenter Studies.
 - Promotion of research projects through Regional Research Competitions.

The following will describe the activities carried out by RGP and the results obtained from its different modalities.

GRADUATE THESIS GRANTS IN PUBLIC HEALTH

This program continues to be one of the most successful, with a significant increase both in demand and in the quality of proposals submitted, as well as in the level of final submissions of research reports. From the time of its creation in 1997 to the end of 1999, a total of 77 projects have been evaluated and 38 have been financed (17 for masters thesis and 21 for doctoral

dissertation). Upon completion, a total of 15 final reports are in the process of being published in the Technical Papers Series *Research in Public Health* and soon will be available full-text on the Internet. The distribution of applications by country and subject area is presented in Tables 1 and 2. The list of projects financed in 1999 appears in Annex I.

Worthy of mention is the support offered by this program to the training of doctoral-level candidates in programs abroad—particularly for those countries that do not have doctoral programs in public health areas, as is the case in Colombia, Chile, Ecuador, Jamaica, and Trinidad and Tobago (Table 3).

With the goal of boosting Program coverage in countries with a lower level of relative development and of providing better chances to junior researchers from those countries, RGP carried out a strategy of mobilizing institutional and financial resources from universities as well as from national offices of science and technology. RGP negotiated two agreements that began in 1999 to benefit the research community in Central American countries. The details on these agreements are described in the section on special RGP agreements.

RESEARCH TRAINING GRANTS IN PUBLIC HEALTH

This program underwent significant growth in 1999 in terms of applications received, despite the fact that this increase is not reflected in the number of projects approved (Table 4 and Annex II). One of the major difficulties confronting the researchers who apply to this program, is to comply satisfactorily with the requirements for the training component abroad. This problem could reflect the limited entry of Latin American and Caribbean researchers, principally those in public health areas, into the international scientific community as well as that of the more developed countries. For this reason, RGP perceived a need to develop a more proactive strategy in its search for institutional opportunities abroad for researchers from the Region.

Given this scenario, RGP intensified its search for centers of excellence sharing common interests with PAHO, not only in areas of research but also in technical cooperation goals involving researcher training and exchange. In addition, RGP initiated contact with specialized networks of specialized research groups, with the aim of taking greater and better advantage of the scientific infrastructure in Latin American countries for processes of exchange opportunities and continuing education for researchers. In 1999, RGP carried out negotiations with the *Instituto de Salud Carlos III* (Charles III Health Institute, or ISCIII) in Spain, signing an agreement to begin in the second semester of the same year. RGP also negotiated and signed an agreement with the *Red Latinoamericana de Biología* (RELAB, or the Latin American Biological Network) to promote collaboration among different research groups. A descriptive summary of both agreements can be found in the section on special RGP agreements.

MULTICENTER PROJECTS

In line with its policies, RGP carried out the annual in-house competition to select profiles for multicenter projects, to be financed with funds from the 1998–1999 biennium. The Technical Units and Pan American Centers presented a total of 11 profiles (Annex III); and in

1999, the approval of two multicenter research projects was announced. The following projects started between the end of 1999 and the beginning of 2000:

- *Inequities in Health Status, Access and Expenditure: Utilizing Secondary Data to Inform Policy-Making:* This project is coordinated by the Division of Health and Human Development (HDP) through the Public Policy and Health Program (HDD), with participation by the following countries: Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Nicaragua, and Peru.
- *Comparative Gender Analysis of Diet and Exercise Behavior in the Caribbean: A Framework for Action:* This project is being coordinated by the Caribbean Food and Nutrition Institute (CFNI), with participation by the following countries: Jamaica, Trinidad, Belize, and St. Kitts and Nevis.

Details on the activities carried out within the framework of both projects can be found in the respective reports prepared by CFNI and the Public Policy and Health Program for the XXXV meeting of the ACHR.

It bears mentioning that in the second semester 1999, RGP worked on developing a multicenter project whose theme had been pre-selected by the Director of PAHO that same year. Said project is entitled *The Nutritional Status of Adolescents during Pregnancy and Nursing* and it is in the final stages of technical and ethical review. Once approved, this project will be financed with RGP funds for 2000, and the ACHR will be informed on its progress in upcoming meetings. The Latin American Center for Perinatology and Human Development (*Centro Latinoamericano de Perinatología y Desarrollo Humano*, or CLAP) will be in charge of its coordination, with participation by the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, and Uruguay.

REGIONAL RESEARCH COMPETITIONS

In the same way that the in-house calls were conducted for the selection of multicenter projects, in 1999 the Technical Units and Pan American Centers were called upon to present research themes leading eventually to calls for proposals. The aforementioned units/centers presented a total of 15 proposals for research themes (the details of which can be found in Annex IV), where they justified their selection of the chosen theme and proposed potential and real uses of the results to be obtained from RGP-financed research. In addition, the presentation of said themes by the Technical Units and Pan American Centers required that the programs assume a role in coordinating the process in close collaboration with RGP, as well as in establishing the technical cooperation activities in their different stages, from promotion to publication and dissemination of results.

In the 1998 ACHR meeting the selected themes were announced, as follows:

1. *Gender and Equity in Access to Health Care in Reforms to Health and Social-Security Systems*, under the coordination of the Women, Health and Development Program (HDW) of the Division of Health and Human Development (HDP).

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2. *Quality Assessment of Diagnostic Radiology Services*, under the coordination of the Essential Drugs and Technology Program (HSE) of the Division of Health Systems and Services Development (HSP).

The following will present the results of both competitions as well as the projects selected to receive a grant.

1. ACTIVITIES AND RESULTS OF THE REGIONAL RESEARCH COMPETITION ON *Gender and Equity in Access to Health Care in Reforms to Health and Social-Security Systems*

The terms of reference for this competition were defined and widely distributed via both electronic and printed media (Annex V). A total of 61 proposals were submitted, the distribution of which is presented by country in Table 6. Notable is the important participation in numerical terms of Peru, Colombia, and Ecuador—an aspect that can be explained in part by the important work that has been carried out in these countries on the themes of gender and health. However, most notable was the number of proposals on themes similar to gender topics, such as sexual and reproductive health, domestic violence and violence against women, and maternal health—among others—and which for lack of compliance with the thematic terms of reference of the competition were excluded from the evaluation process. This situation suggests that the theme of equity and gender and its relation with reform processes is a theme of limited interest for researchers from the Region who have devoted their professional attention to gender studies.

Those whose projects complied with the terms of reference of the call for proposals totaled 16, which were then submitted to a process of evaluation by an *ad hoc* committee of area specialists. Noteworthy was the participation on said committee of specialists from different professions (sociology, economics, demography, and health) from such international institutions as the IDB and the World Bank, as well as from such academic centers of excellence as Harvard and the College of Mexico.

Finally, a total of six (6) projects were funded (Barbados, Brazil, Colombia, Chile, Ecuador, and Peru). Details on these projects can be found in Annex VI.

2. ACTIVITIES AND RESULTS OF THE REGIONAL COMPETITION ON *Quality Assessment of Diagnostic Radiological Services*

Due to the characteristics of the theme and by virtue of its being an initiative that—in addition to its own findings—intends to offer an innovative methodological contribution on approaches for quality assessment of diagnostic radiological services, the Technical Program decided to carry out a promotion effort directed at certain centers and countries based on the terms of reference developed by said program (Annex VII). Five (5) projects were selected and funded, with participation by Argentina, Bolivia, Colombia, Cuba, and Mexico (Table 7 and Annex VIII).

SPECIAL AGREEMENTS OF THE RESEARCH GRANTS PROGRAM

Within the framework of RGP policies, modalities, and resources, 1999 saw an intensification of the processes of “partner identification” and of mobilization of scientific and institutional resources to support health research in LAC countries. With this strategy, RGP was able to respond to the decisions made by PAHO’s Director based on ACHR recommendations from the last two meetings. The special agreements fall into the area where greater emphasis is placed on training researchers and on providing continuing education for them, responding to ACHR recommendations related to the following:

- The need to orient focused actions towards supporting countries with a lower level of relative development.
- To promote and support researcher exchange among LAC countries and to develop collaborative projects among them.
- To promote and support high-impact biomedical research aimed at solving public health problems.
- To strengthen ties with National Science and Technology advisory boards.

The special agreements constitute mechanisms of collaborative work between PAHO and institutions involved in scientific promotion, academic institutions, and research networks. Their basic principle was peers working in partnership to the benefit of countries and researchers of the Region, with a joint contribution of resources from both partners. In this sense, these agreements—besides implying a mobilization of resources from the participating countries and institutions—enabled the opening up of new spaces and options for health researchers. A summary of the special agreements is presented in Table 8, with the following providing a description of the same.

1. Training and Continuing Education for Health Researchers in Central America

This agreement was signed with the Central American Population and Health Program of the University of Costa Rica (UCR), for a duration of 18 months. The objectives of said agreement are the following:

- To support both technically and financially six (6) thesis projects by Central American students registered in the Masters Program in Population and Health, in the theme of *Inequalities and Inequities in Health*, utilizing such secondary data sources as the Sociodemographic and Health Surveys.
- To fund six (6) fellowships for participation of Central American researchers in two training workshops with an average duration of three weeks each. Said workshops were carried out on the main UCR campus on the themes of *Communicating Research Results to Decision-Makers* (in May 2000) and *New Methods for Analyzing Quantitative Data for Measuring and Evaluating Health Interventions* (in July 2000).

2. *Strengthening Public Health Research in Guatemala*

This agreement was signed by the National Council of Science and Technology (*Consejo Nacional de Ciencia y Tecnología*, or CONICYT) of Guatemala for a duration of two (2) years and a total amount of US \$100,000 co-financed in equal parts by PAHO and CONICYT.

The agreement has the following objectives:

General Objective

- To strengthen the development of public health research in Guatemala.

Specific Objectives

- To contribute to the development of postgraduate theses in public health.
- To support research teams in elaborating public health studies.

3. *Grants for Training Health Researchers*

This agreement was signed with the Charles III Health Institute (Instituto de Salud Carlos III, or ISCIII) in Spain for US\$ 120,000, co-financed in equal parts by PAHO and ISCIII, for the purpose of providing training and continuing education to six (6) Latin American researchers.

The agreement has the following objectives:

- To offer researchers from Latin American countries opportunities for research training through a structured stay in one of the various technical units of ISCIII, with an assigned advisor from that unit.
- To strengthen health research institutions in Latin American countries by collaborating in permanent continuing education programs for researchers.
- To collaborate in the production of knowledge through research projects in priority themes of interest to the countries of the Region.
- To promote closer collaboration among research institutions in Latin America and Spain.

During the second semester 1999, the offer for grants was offered along with the application requirements (Annex IX). In the first trimester 2000, the projects were submitted; and the candidates, selected.

This initiative was extremely well received by the researcher community in LAC countries, producing a total of 106 applications with exceptionally high participation from Colombia, Cuba, Peru and Ecuador, respectively (Table 9). An *ad hoc* review committee was formed from specialists at PAHO and ISCIII to carry out an integrated review, leading to a consensus where 36 proposals were pre-selected and where eventually six (6) candidates

emerged in the final selection (2 from Cuba, 2 from Colombia, 1 from Ecuador and 1 from Peru: see Table 10).

4. *Collaborative Research Projects on Infectious Diseases with Latin American and Caribbean Laboratories (PAHO-RELAB)*

This agreement was signed by PAHO and the Latin American Biological Network (*Red Latinoamericana de Biología*, or RELAB). Its objectives are the following:

- To support research projects on infectious diseases, with special emphasis on emerging and re-emerging diseases that constitute public health problems in countries of the Region (e.g. infectious diseases resistant to known remedies, new diseases of viral origin, etc.).
- To promote collaboration among countries and laboratories of the Region having a lower level of scientific infrastructure and research capacity with those that have developed a greater scientific and technological capacity.
- To collaborate in researcher training and exchange processes with the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean.

In the second semester 1999, there was a call for proposals where the terms of reference were publicly announced; and between April and May 2000, the projects were submitted and the evaluation and selection processes were carried out.

This initiative was also very well received by the scientific community of LAC countries, producing a total of 55 applications complying with the requirements of setting up a collaborative effort between at least two (2) laboratories. Table 11 gives an overview of the countries that presented collaborative projects, and Annex X provides details on the proposals, researchers, and laboratories involved. Table 12 provides a list of the collaborative projects selected for funding.

It is important to point out that not only the number but also the quality of the proposals reflect a high level of current interest on the part of said scientific community in generating collaborative projects and, above all, in intensifying relationships of exchange and collaboration.

5. *Agreement with the International Clearinghouse for Health-Sector Reform Initiative (ICHSRI)*

This agreement, financed by the Nordic countries with the Mexican Foundation for Health (*Fundación Mexicana para la Salud*, or FUNSALUD) in charge of coordination, seeks to promote and support research on the theme of sectorial reform and its effects on access to, utilization of, and financing of health services in third-world countries.

In 1998–1999, the third round of a call for research profiles was carried out, the theme of which was *Promoting Better Health through Equity-Related Research*. RGP was asked to

collaborate in this initiative for the Region of the Americas, for which a collaborative agreement was signed in which PAHO/RGP agreed to

- Collaborate in the promotion of the initiative in LAC countries and identify research groups in that thematic area.
- Participate as secretariat in the review and evaluation process for projects from the Region.
- Offer technical advice for the projects and participate in the workshops.
- Collaborate in reviewing the manuscripts for publication of findings.

Of all the projects presented at the global level, 10 were from LAC and 5 were financed (Chile, Peru, Jamaica, Mexico, Colombia) (Annex XI).

ICHSRI agreed to perform the following tasks:

- Follow up on approved LAC projects and inform PAHO on progress and results.
- Coordinate and organize a regional seminar with principal investigators of the approved projects for discussion of their results.
- Coordinate publications.

3. Conclusions

- The results obtained over the past three years, starting in 1997 with the operative changes in RGP policies and modalities, all show evidence that said changes have responded satisfactorily to emerging needs and to new challenges to health research in the countries. RGP has grown from a fund for financing projects into an important instrument for technical cooperation in research, promoting a model of collaborative work among peers acting as partners and mobilizing resources from institutions of scientific excellence in the Region. This is shown by the way the program has been managed and particularly by the maturity it has reached in the course of 1999.
- Through the regional competitions and multicenter projects, and in addition to having increased and improved the identification and registry of centers and researchers in the Region, said projects have become a powerful instrument for constructing collaborative networks among countries and researchers.
- Starting with the special agreements established between PAHO and scientific institutions and networks, researcher training and exchange has taken both a quantitative and qualitative leap. This strategy has permitted the creation of a greater number of options now available to researchers, in addition to facilitating a more efficient use of the scarce resources available.

- Concerning the production of knowledge, RGP has facilitated and supported the opening up of new areas barely studied but of high interest to the processes of formulating policies and interventions. Noteworthy is RGP's contribution to provide impetus to studies and researchers in the area of Equity and Health and to offer a better comprehension of the determinants of social inequalities. This effort, more than an academic exercise, tends to the needs of a line of work oriented towards generating proposals for policies and intervention regarding those inequalities that are preventable and unjust.
- The multiplying effect that RGP has had on the production of knowledge and on researcher exchange and training, could also have a multiplying effect on the processes of knowledge dissemination and utilization. In this sense, RGP will need to convert said efforts into dynamic processes for disseminating its products and collaborating in initiatives of greater scope oriented towards the processes of democratizing knowledge and information, much in the way the DECIDES strategy has done.
- In summary, RGP is a program involved in a strategy of PAHO technical cooperation in research and—as was stated before—goes beyond being just a fund to being a facilitating instrument for the processes of knowledge production, exchange and collaboration among researchers, and dissemination and utilization of the knowledge produced. In this context, its impact can be measured not only by the activities and projects it finances, but also by its capacity to respond creatively and flexibly to the rapid changes taking place in today's "knowledge and information society" and to offer both a working model and viable methodology for the countries of the Region.

ANNEXES AND TABLES

Not available in electronic format.