

Research for Health at the Directing Council of the Pan American Health Organization

PAHO is the first WHO region to have its Health Research Policy

HIGHLIGHTS

The new PAHO policy on research for health was endorsed by all Member States at the annual meeting of its Directing Council in September 2009.¹

- The policy stresses the importance of national governance and stewardship as a key to successful cooperation on research in PAHO countries and regions.
- With this resolution, PAHO is the first WHO body to have a policy on research for health. Adoption of the World Health Organization's health research strategy is in process but postponed since May 2009.

Background:

In recent years, national governments, PAHO/WHO, and the international research community have called for the strengthening of national research systems and improved use of research results. Building local capability and innovation in low and middle income countries are priority concerns. PAHO's resolution to develop a Policy on Research for Health was designed to assist in developing strategies and plans that address the needs of the Americas region, and align with global and regional policies.

The PAHO Directing Council thus initiated in 2008 a process of national, sub-national and regional consultations, which resulted in a draft resolution presented to the 14th Executive Committee of PAHO. The Committee recommended to adopt the resolution with a proposed amendment. The amendment addressed some Member States' concerns about anti-trust regulations, duplication of research resources, methodology, maximizing free research resources, and the framing of intellectual property and finances.

The draft resolution has six overarching objectives² put into action in five activities³. These set a standard for ensuring research quality, regional cooperation and approaches that get research evidence into use. It also calls for five percent of PAHO's total budget to support research for health.

¹ Resolution CD49.R10

http://new.paho.org/hq/index.php?option=com_content&task=blogcategory&id=1259&Itemid=1159

² To: Promote high quality research; Strengthen research governance; Support human resources in research; Enhance the impact of research; Foster improved standards for research; and Promote the dissemination and utilization of findings.

³ 1) Assessing the problem 2) Understanding its cause 3) Elaborating solutions 4) Translating solutions and 5) Evaluating the impact of solutions.

The PAHO research for health policy

The PAHO research for health policy encourages PAHO Member States to recognize the **importance of research for health and equity** and stresses that policies for research for health should be aligned with national plans. It underlines the necessity **to adopt a multi-sectoral approach to research for health** and to strengthen key national institutions.

It encourages countries of the region to work with PAHO to reinforce and monitor their national health research systems and improve the quality, leadership and management of research for health. It recommends **establishing governance mechanisms** for research for health that will allow coordinating effectively the strategies of the relevant sectors.

It promotes **inter-country and sub-regional collaboration** as a way to obtain efficiency and economies of scale in research in the region by sharing experiences, best practices and resources, and to improve research uptake.

The need for evidence-based decision making and assessment of technology and products was acknowledged as an important issue, but not included in this policy. It will be considered as a topic for a future resolution.

Overview of discussions:

The discussion on the policy centered on the importance of research as a way to achieve equity, socio-economic development and health standards. The timeliness a policy on research was also emphasized, partly because of the current threat of pandemics and endemics. Some Members (including Mexico and Cuba) stressed that **health research must be relevant to regional needs**, and is a 'state matter' for which **national and local governments are responsible**. Cuba asserted that research must be more closely linked to results; a view echoed by the United States delegate who commented that, "the strength is in the translation of research." An additional concern was that **new research initiatives could lead to duplication of effort**. Delegates encouraged PAHO to focus on *supporting* rather than conducting research.

Member States **supported the participation of the private sector, non-governmental organisations, civil society organisations, and indigenous populations** in health research efforts. Some suggested target areas for research, including mental health; HIV; non-communicable diseases; neglected diseases; the elderly; and adolescents⁴. Bolivia appealed for recognition that **social research is as critical as clinical research** and merits equal attention and resources. Paraguay emphasized the need to create national structures for promoting health research in low and middle-income countries. Argentina concurred that health research had low performance levels in some countries, admitting that Argentina itself hadn't made "as much headway as it would like."

Several countries described their progress in health research -- including the creation of research agencies and policies, funding initiatives and information technologies -- and made a commitment to sharing their experiences with other Member States. The point was frequently made that **regional and sub-regional cooperation and involvement in research was essential** to successfully implement the policy. PAHO was encouraged to reinforce its efforts to coordinate countries' research efforts and findings.

Obstacles and particular needs to support the progress of national health research were highlighted. These include a lack of well-defined priorities,⁵ inadequate or unreliable funding, and the absence of indicators to assess the impact of research and its products.⁶ Colombian

⁴ Canada: mental health; elderly; adolescents; neglected disease; indigenous. Trinidad and Tobago: non-communicable diseases. Barbados: HIV

⁵ Jamaica/ Uruguay (which is currently attempting to define those priorities)

⁶ Argentina/Trinidad and Tobago

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delegates called for cost-effectiveness studies, citing its difficulty with high prices set by companies producing new technologies, and the lack of data on the efficacy of these products. They commented that it may be possible to pay less and achieve better results from other sources who are less indifferent to the economic impact on the healthcare system.

In response, Dr. José Luis di Fabio, Manager of Technology, Healthcare, and Research at PAHO, confirmed the importance of state governance of the health research policy and assured that PAHO's role was to support countries in developing their own capacities and using research results. PAHO's role was described as assisting, not driving, research. He emphasized that all the issues raised were reflected and addressed in the resolution, including the question of inter-sectoral alliances and the need to identify synergies that can provide knowledge to the global arena.

COHRED COMMENT

- The PAHO Policy on Research for Health is an important policy that will strengthen research for health capacities and activities in the region.
- The regional plan will reinforce the role and leadership of health and research authorities in the Americas. Health research plays a vital role in today's rapidly changing environment. It helps countries face significant health, social and economic challenges. To play this role effectively, countries require governance mechanisms that ensure research is done according to national needs and provides evidence that will be translated into relevant and equitable health policies.
- With more than 100 years' experience in public health, PAHO is well placed to help countries of the region further strengthen their national health research systems – to ensure they are effectively governed, staffed, and driven by evidence-based national and regional priorities.
- Several countries in the region have well-developed national systems to manage research for health. They are well placed to support countries with less expertise to develop strong systems.
- In its policy, PAHO makes a positive contribution to strengthening research capacity in the region by defining its role as a facilitator of research cooperation and expertise – between institutions and countries.

ACTION POINTS FOR COUNTRIES

- To facilitate the implementation of the new policy, countries should put in place or reinforce national research management mechanisms and policies on research for health.
- Countries with effective research for health systems should be encouraged to develop regional and sub-regional cooperation to support less advanced countries of the region to build their research capacities.
- Countries less advanced in research for health governance and management should build the skills, infrastructure and set research priorities based as a first step toward developing their national health research systems.
- Countries should set research priorities that are linked to financing mechanisms to facilitate its implementation.