

Summary of the IANPHI-Latin American and Caribbean network meetings on NPHI responses to COVID-19

Context

On 14/09 and 21/09/2020, Felix Rosenberg (Chair of the IANPHI-Latin American and Caribbean network) held two meetings with members to discuss the role of institutes in response to COVID-19. In 2020, the LATAM network also has held a series of virtual meetings around other specific topics related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The summary captures the conclusions from a number of member presentations, including; the main functions of institutes in response to COVID-19, the challenges experienced and opportunities for improvement. These meetings also contribute to the global IANPHI initiative for collecting lessons learned from members' responses to COVID-19.

We are particularly thankful to the following institutes who presented their experiences to the network:

- ANLIS (Argentina)
- Fiocruz (Brasil)
- INLASA (Bolivia)
- INS (Colombia)
- INSPI (Ecuador)
- LCSP (Paraguay)
- INS (Perú)
- DGS (Uruguay)
- CARPHA
- INS (El Salvador)
- INSP (Mexico)

Scope of functions

For many institutes in the IANPHI-Latin American and Caribbean network, COVID-19 responses include epidemiological surveillance at national and regional levels, support for case definitions, coordination of national reference laboratories, quality control of testing and testing kits, genome sequencing and developing innovative research on COVID-19. A number of institutes are recognised WHO reference laboratories and supported information sharing with the WHO throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

Sub-national coordination

In the context of their national laboratory coordination, a number of NPHIs raised the challenges of coordinating and sharing information with laboratory networks at regional levels. In many cases, this was largely due to slow and unclear communication channels between institutions. Moreover, strained national coordination for COVID-19 responses were also a result of the varied outbreak characteristics at the sub-national level. Political and social distinctions at sub-national level also meant that NPHIs were involved in adapting risk communication to reach these communities.

Laboratories and surveillance capacities

NPHIs in the Latin American and Caribbean network were critical actors providing strategic and technical laboratory and testing support to governments. From the beginning of the pandemic, NPHIs used their strong laboratory and genomic capacities to develop case definitions, lead quality

control processes for tests and testing kits and develop COVID-19 treatments. These laboratory functions were highly valued at the highest national levels.

Moreover, a number of NPHIs were involved in developing surveillance systems to analyse transmission through communities that was used in supporting national decision making.

Human and medical resource challenges

A majority of NPHIs in the region identified significant challenges for accessing human and medical resources. Firstly, at national and sub-national levels, a lack of trained personnel for a range of functions impacted the NPHI response to COVID-19. NPHIs were involved in developing online training courses to quickly on-board staff to support responses.

Additionally, many NPHIs were affected by difficulties accessing medical goods at regional and international levels. This particularly impacted laboratory and testing functions as NPHIs had difficulty accessing reagents and personal protective equipment (PPE).

Research and innovation

Through their laboratory, communication and research functions, NPHIs were involved in developing innovations in national responses to COVID-19. For many NPHIs this included significantly increasing their output of COVID-19 research to better understand the burdens of the virus. Certain NPHIs are also working on COVID-19 treatments and vaccine strategies. For instance, through its National infectiology institute and its vaccine production premises, Bio-Manguinhos, FIOCRUZ is playing an important role for Brazil's COVID-19 treatment and vaccine strategies.

Moreover, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, a number of NPHIs further developed their health promotion and risk communication functions. As many countries experienced regional differences in COVID-19 outbreaks, institutes developed risk communication and health promotion messaging adapted to diverse communities.

NPHIs in the region are widely recognised as providing critical scientific support and expert analysis to national decision makers in the COVID-19 response. Institutes have produced significant amounts of research and summaries of analyses from around the world. In the context of COVID-19's infodemic, NPHIs in the Latin American and Caribbean network played important roles in providing trusted science-based information.