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Improving Governance and Management of Health Systems: Partnerships and Observatories in Latin America and the Caribbean

by Rafael Cortez and Katharina Ferl

Public Health Observatories and National Health Strategies and Policies

The goal of a public health observatory, first established in France in 1974 and later in England and the rest of Europe, is to support the decision-making process in health and social care by providing policy makers with relevant information. Public health observatories proactively investigate health issues to provide robust analytical evidence to policy makers. This type of organization has different characteristics from other public health institutions, such as information-gathering bodies, academic public health departments, or state employed public health practitioners. Their functions may vary, depending on their mission statements, but, in general, health observatories produce and disseminate health intelligence in order to provide information and analysis, inform policy makers and practitioners, improve health, and reduce inequalities[1]. They provide an arena for various actors to discuss health policy trends and reforms and raise awareness of important health challenges. They also collaborate with academic institutions, think tanks, government bodies and international organizations to analyze health systems and provide policy advice based on extensive research and analysis. **Table 1** lists some health observatories in Europe.

International and regional public health observatories reflect partnerships among national governments, international institutions, and universities.[2] At the international level, the World Health Organization's Global Health Observatory provides data and analyses on global health priorities. At the regional level, the European Health Observatory for Health Systems and Policies engages directly with policy-makers and supports and promotes evidence-based health policy-making through comprehensive and rigorous analysis of the dynamics of health systems.

Table 1. Global and European Public Health Observatories

Global	Global Health Observatory
Europe	European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies
Great Britain	Association of Public Health Observatories
	London Health Observatory
France	ANTADIR Observatory
Spain	Public Health Observatory of Cantabria
Austria	Gesundheit Oesterreich

Health observatories provide tailored information for planning and supporting better investments in health. This can be achieved by linking data and technical discussions across relevant units within the government, monitoring health and disease trends, providing strategic areas of technical work, holding discussions on health inequalities, and providing recommendations for future actions. A

1. Lam M, Jacobson B, Fitzpatrick J. 2010. Establishing a Regional Public Health Observatory – Some Questions Answered. London Health Observatory.
2. Hemmings J. and Wilkinson J. 2003. What is a public health observatory? Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health 57: 324–326.

key area of work of observatories is the collection of information from various sources and the production and dissemination of reports and assessments on health outcomes and health sector performance. Such reports can help local governments and health services to plan ahead. To enable decision makers to take advantage of local knowledge, expertise and insight observatories can also produce toolkits, which include a large amount of data covering various topics. Further, they can be used as accountability mechanisms by developing tools to monitor and evaluate health programs, enabling local agencies to measure their success against national targets.[3] Some observatories also develop "control profiles" to address specific health problems, such as London's Local Tobacco Control Profiles. These profiles provide data on tobacco users, the impact on their health, and measures to reduce these impacts at the local level.

The degree to which public health observatories can fulfill their role depends on whether (i) issues such as public health and inequality are priority topics on the health agenda, (ii) a public health infrastructure exists at the national, regional and local levels, (iii) health and demographic data are routinely collected and made available, (iv) gaps in public health information are identified and authorities are committed to closing them, and (v) health systems support the standardization of data collection, tools and indicators.

Public Health Observatories in Latin America

Governments in Latin America have also begun establishing regional, national, and provincial observatories. Some of the regional observatories provide comparisons of countries in the region in areas such as public health, human resources, food security, and nutrition. National and provincial observatories often have a national or a specific agenda. In addition to providing data, observatories often provide a monitoring mechanism. For example, the Reproductive Health Observatory in Guatemala aims to monitor the legal framework that was put in place to reduce maternal death, teenage pregnancies, and HIV incidence. It also addresses challenges such as equal access to services. The Observatory for Hospital Monitoring in Mexico issues an annual report, which describes and analyzes the performance of the major public institutions of the Mexican hospital system in terms of quality of services, dynamics of emergency room services, efficiency, and patient safety. The Observatory for Medication Prices in Peru provides information on price differences by publishing the prices of medicines in hospital pharmacies, specialized institutions, and health centers of the Ministry of Health. The Observatory for Equity in Health in Chile, established because Chile is one of thirteen countries participating in the Global Alliance for Health, has as its main objective to create a system to monitor health inequities and inform, monitor, and evaluate health policies and their social determinants. In Brazil, health observatories also focus on a variety of topics at the national and state levels. For example, the Health Observatory for the Metropolitan Area of São Paolo disseminates information on municipal management, institutions that manage the unified health system, and health professionals. [4]

Federal Health Observatory in Argentina

In Argentina, the Ministry of Health is in the process of establishing a national health observatory, with technical assistance support from the World Bank, in the context of the goals of the Federal Health Plan for 2010-2016. The Strengthening Governance in Argentina's Health Sector Technical Assistance Project includes several activities funded by the Governance Partnership Facility Trust Fund. The grant aims to improve governance in the health sector by providing analytical and technical support for a multi-stakeholder National Observatory for Heath Policy, in cooperation with the Ministry of Health. Activities supported by the grant were embedded in the Provincial Maternal and Child Health Investment Project, especially in the second component's strategic goal of strengthening the stewardship capacity of the national and provincial ministries. The activities supported by the project are in line with the government's strategic priorities.

The design and implementation of the observatory is seen as an effective way to improve the stewardship capacity of the Ministry of Health under the Federal Public Health System. Argentina has expressed strong demand for this

3. Ashton J. 2000. Public Health Observatories: the Key to Timely Public Health Intelligence in the New Century. Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health. 54:724–725.
4. A more extensive list of national observatories, with links to their web pages, can be found in Table 2

observatory to provide national and provincial health authorities with solid scientific analyses of relevant practices. In turn, this will help improve planning and management processes, standardize health data, and maximize social equity and efficiency of health programs and policies. Health authorities also want to improve monitoring of health results and health sector performance. The observatory will produce national, regional, and provincial reports every two to three years to analyze challenges and trends in the entire health sector, as well as studies and policy briefs, newsletters, a website, articles and databases. It will also hold seminars and summer programs to train technical staff.

Implementation of the proposed observatory is currently under review at the Ministry of Health. The proposal recommends locating the Observatory within the Ministry of Health, with its Executive Director reporting directly to the Minister. The Scientific Director would lead the effort to build strong relationships with the scientific and academic communities and ensure high quality products, services and information systems. The Administrative Director would be responsible for the administration and financial management. The proposal's aim is to link the Observatory to an integrated health information system that will monitor health policies by collecting independent data. Access to such information will help the Ministry set investment priorities and obtain consensus among the provincial ministries and other stakeholders with respect to the federal health agenda and policies.

Through technical assistance supported by the Essential Public Health Functions—Phase 2 Project and the Provincial Public Health Insurance Development Project, the World Bank will continue supporting the Health Ministry's initiatives to enhanced governance in the health sector by introducing participatory approaches and developing and testing approaches to greater transparency, accountability, and financial accountability across levels of government in the sector.

Looking forward: A Regional Partnership to Strengthen Health Systems

Following the successful work of the European observatories and the development of observatories in Latin America and the Caribbean, the World Bank is supporting the development of a Regional Partnership Program on Health Systems and Policies (RPPHSP) which will, for the first time, bring together the different regions in the Bank to focus on health systems and policies. Under this initiative, the Bank is supporting regional and national efforts to strengthen governance and health systems. In addition, the partnership aims to foster further collaboration among academic institutions and connect different stakeholders, promote dialogue with key policy-makers, and leverage additional funding from different agencies. Finally, the partnership will generate evidence for policy makers through activities such as collecting country-specific data information, monitoring country performance, conducting cross-country comparative analysis, and making research findings easily available.

Summary and conclusions

Regional and national health observatories have become important tools for governments and health ministries to support national strategic partnerships and to empower civil society, health sector stakeholders, and health sector authorities seeking to develop more effective and efficient health systems. Focused on epidemiological trends, equity of health service provision, health outcomes, and impact evaluation of health interventions, these efforts will improve planning, management, and monitoring and evaluating of public health actions.

Health observatories are therefore a key instrument for health systems to generate information, data, and intelligence on people's health status and the type and quality of health care delivery. By making all this information available to health providers and policy makers in a timely manner, the health observatories will ensure that their national health systems are results-oriented and engaged in a continuous process of improving quality and access.

Table 2. Public Health Observatories in Latin America

Regional
Health System Observatory of MERCOSUR (in establishment process)
Latin America and Caribbean Health Observatory
Regional Health Observatory
The Andean Observatory of Human Resources in Health
Regional Observatory for Human Resources in Health
Observatory for Food Security and Nutrition (Costa Rica, Guatemala, Mexico, Panama, Honduras)

Argentina
National Health Observatory (in establishment process)
Observatory for Health Systems and Policies
Observatory for Health, Gender and Human Rights
Reproductive Health Observatory
Observatory for Women in the Province of Tucuman
Observatory for Human Resources in Health
Public Health Observatory for the Province of Cordoba
Observatory for Road Safety

Bolivia
Observatory for Sexual and Reproductive Rights

Brazil
Mental Health and Human Rights Observatory
Observatory for Human Resources
Brazilian Observatory for Gender Equality
Health Observatory of the Metropolitan Region of Sao Paulo
Observatory for Technology of Communication Information in Health Service Systems

Chile
Public Health Observatory
Gender Equity in Health Observatory
Regional Observatory for Equity in Health according Gender and Mapuche People
Chilean Observatory for Equity in Health
Observatory for Good Health Practice

Colombia
Santander Public Health Observatory
National Observatory for Mental Health
National Observatory for Oral Health and Dentistry Practice
Observatory for the Quality of Health Care
Observatory for Human Resources in Health
Observatory for Pediatric Sepsis
Observatory for Monitoring the Quality of Higher Education in Psychology
Observatory for Food and Nutrition Security

Ecuador
National Observatory of Health and Sexual and Reproductive Rights

Guatemala
Reproductive Health Observatory
Urban Health Observatory

Mexico
Health Observatory
Maternal Mortality Observatory
Observatory for Monitoring Hospital Performance

Nicaragua
Human Rights in Health Observatory

Paraguay
Human Resources Observatory

Perú
Health Observatory
National Observatory for Human Resources
Observatory for Medication Prices

Uruguay
Human Resources Observatory
National Observatory on Gender and Sexual and Reproductive Health

Venezuela
Venezuelan Health Observatory
Observatory for Nutrition

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