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WFPHA: World Federation of Public Health Associations

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Public Health Challenges in the Americas Region: The Alliance Response

In 1967, seven National Public Health Associations, including that of the United States of America and Venezuela, founded the World Federation of Public Health Associations (WFPHA) as a non-governmental organization to address public health with a comprehensive conception. Between 1991 and 2004, there have been two attempts to establish some sort of regional alliance of associations from the American continent, neither of which endured beyond the stage of theoretical formulation. Moreover, the Latin American Association of Schools of Public Health (ALAES), after working actively over the last three decades of the last century, stopped its activity from the year 2000.

This means that the region has not been able to rely on a joint effort of national public health associations to improve the health of its population.

Then in April 2015, during the Second International Convention of Health of Cuba, after three years of work, the “Alliance of Associations of Public Health of the Americas (AASPA)” emerged in the presence of executives of the World Federation of Public Health Associations by the National Public Health Associations of Brazil, Nicaragua, Bolivia, United States, Puerto Rico, Guatemala, and Cuba. In May 2016, the Governing Council and the General Assembly of the WFPHA agreed to grant the AASPA the status of Regional Member; two months later, the First General Assembly of the AASPA approved the statutes.

The Alliance must now face a series of serious challenges to align public health in the region. Consistent with the “Declaration of Panama,”¹ the Alliance has presented its work plan for the future. As reported in the

declaration, although during the last two decades important gains have been achieved in the health of the populations of the Americas (reducing child mortality levels, increasing life expectancy at birth), other factors (such as increased risks of non-communicable diseases, injuries, mental disorders, and infectious diseases) continue to challenge health systems. Several causes of morbidity and mortality and deep inequalities between countries and within the countries persist.

In Latin America and the Caribbean, although extreme poverty and social inequality have been reduced in recent years, the region remains the most unequal on the planet. In 2014, the 19 per cent richest in the region accumulated 71 per cent of its wealth. In addition, the social inequalities in health especially affect those of African descent, migrants, displaced persons, and other vulnerable groups.

In this context the “Declaration” states that:

...progress on the health of the peoples of the Americas requires improving the circumstances in which people are born, grow, live, work, and get old; fighting the unequal distribution of power, money and resources. It is necessary to measure the importance of health problems, evaluate actions, expand the knowledge, provide trained personnel, expert also in social determinants of health, and raise public opinion in this regard. Efforts to strengthen public health systems are essential to ensure universal health coverage.

The Declaration also affirms that:

...the commitment to act in collaboration with multilateral non-governmental organizations, governments, and under the conceptions of health as a basic human right and in connection with social and environmental determinants, with the purpose of expand democratic governance, self-determination of peoples, respect for human rights, strengthening the spirit of democracy and the fight against various forms of corruption.

Further, the document commits signatory public health associations to work to achieve the goals expressed in the agenda 2030 for sustainable development in the Rio Political Declaration on Social Determinants of Health² and the Global Charter for Public Health,^{3,4} that the WFPHA proposed in 2016.

To address these challenges, the new Alliance’s policy aims to:

- develop actions from an integrated view of processes and levels of health systems, with the idea that health is a fundamental right and service coverage should be universal and directed to disease prevention as well as treatment;
- Promote health and welfare of the population from a perspective of social determinants and health equity;
- Promote public health policies that improve the material circumstances of life as well as individual and collective behaviors as a way to achieve “healthy populations in healthy environments and communities” by protecting the environment and the health of all.

Its strategy is based on involvement of the associations’ members who should lead organizations to advocate to:

- Protect the health of the populations in the region,
- Assume responsibility to carry out the social mandate to exchange experiences and create networking and cooperation mechanisms among members to improve public health coverage to become universal as a way to raise standards of health and equity for all.

Research and open multidisciplinary scientific debate constitute fundamental tools.

Consequently, the Alliance commits itself to:

- Promote creation and development of new national associations and to continue to strengthen existing ones in the American Region
- Encourage coordinated effort among agencies and organizations working towards health at the country level, including national and international agencies
- Promote collaboration and cooperation between associations
- Promote scientific research and development of health policies, good practices, and training of human capital in all fields that can contribute to improving the population health
- Promote exchange of information and evidence from scientific activity with ministries and national health systems to develop key policies, strategies, and programs
- Exchange successful experiences from different models of health care and universal health coverage, especially those related to primary health care (PHC)
- Establish partnerships on health issues with the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), intergovernmental organizations, and other regional offices of UN agencies, as affiliates of WFPHA in the Americas region.

Development, implementation, and evaluation of actions between the members needs methodological, technical, and scientific support based on:

- Exchange of academic staff, both scientific and technical, for short or medium term, that will include training in the form of courses, postgraduate courses (diploma, masters, doctoral, and post-doctoral courses)
- Establish communication channels for exchange of scientific knowledge, bibliographies, and publications
- Cooperate in seeking the support of United Nations agencies and other national and international agencies for raising funds
- Explore areas for joint research on public health issues of common interest

For cooperation at its current stage of development the Alliance recommends:

- Training of health professionals
- Development of joint research in priority areas
- Evaluation of health systems
- Cooperation in priority areas of public health

In conclusion, the American associations and public health systems and health services should recognize the need for closer and more systematic collaboration among them. They should be eager to improve such cooperation, signing agreements to develop joint initiatives to improve the health and quality of life of the populations of the countries of the Americas region.

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