

INCAP Publication CI/009

PROMOTION AND PROTECTION OF FOOD AND

NUTRITION IN CENTRAL AMERICA; INCAP'S ROLE

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In September, the Institute of Nutrition of Central America and Panama - INCAP, a regional center of the Pan American Health Organization, will be celebrating its XLV Anniversary. During this period the Institute has been involved in scientific and technical activities providing technical cooperation to improve the food and nutrition situation of the Central American population. Moreover, since its foundation, INCAP has targeted its efforts to study the nature, magnitude, distribution and determinants of the nutritional problems and to identify possible solutions to existing priority food and nutrition problems, which have been related to inadequate access, consumption and biological utilization of foods. Additionally the Institute has been involved in strengthening the capabilities of human resources to address the design, implementation and evaluation of food and nutrition programs, to respond to the demands of technical and scientific assistance aimed at the improvement of the food and nutrition situation of the population, specially of those most at risk and has disseminated scientific and technical information. However, as a tertiary level type of organization, INCAP does not execute activities nor provides direct services to the population.

The complex political and socio-economic conditions which has characterized the development of the region has not made INCAP's task easy. The last decade has been related to the achievement of peace, yet still suffering the effects of military-political confrontations, affecting an important segment of the population. In the economic arena, the majority of the countries are suffering the effects of the socioeconomic crisis, which are associated to the implementation of structural adjustment measures and to macroeconomic policies. Thus, within its possibilities and taking into consideration the changes that have occurred during the last decade, (both in terms of socio-political-economic changes as well as the epidemiological nutritional transition), INCAP has defined its Strategic Plan for the 1991-2000 decade aimed at promoting and protecting food and nutrition security in the region, identifying as major processes: the generation of science and technology, its transfer to the Member Countries (that is Central America, Panama and Belize), and enhancement of its managerial and information capabilities.

Presented at the World Alliance for Nutrition and Human Rights. Florence, Italy, May 16-23, 1994.

As part of the process of research and the generation of science and technology, and in support of the Food and Nutrition Security Initiative, approved by the Summit of Presidents held in 1993, INCAP is currently placing special emphasis to address needs for applied and operationally oriented research. Taking into consideration the existing problems at the regional, national and local levels, the institute has defined eight priority programs related to food and nutrition policies, food protection and consumer orientation; food, nutrition and health integrated systems; production and food technology; prevention and control of infectious diseases; prevention and control of micronutrient deficiencies; and development and training of human resources. Example of research topics of concern relate to focalization of activities to improve impact of food and nutrition interventions, design of interventions to improve feeding practices as well as availability and access of foods and conduct assessments to determine attitudes and practices of policy-level decision-makers in regards to protection and promotion of food and nutrition.

Furthermore, in view of the limited application and utilization of the food and nutrition technologies, methodologies and knowledge developed by the Institute, INCAP is currently placing special emphasis to technology transfer and development of models and systematic approaches, via its decentralization whereby multidisciplinary country teams have been established and are responsible for the direct technical assistance provided to the institute's counterparts, primarily from the social sector, that is health, education and agriculture. Additional strategies identified to facilitate and support the technology transfer process are the establishment of a regional network to promote the collaboration among public institutions and training and research centers involved in the design, implementation and evaluation of food and nutrition programs as well as training of personnel. Modalities of training include the reopening of the Food and Nutrition Master Program, placing special emphasis to address needs to applied actions and programs, residencies, short courses, tutorial training and distance education.

In view of the above, and considering INCAP's regional mandate, the institute for the coming years, foresees possible roles to be played in Central America in regards to monitoring the food and nutrition situation, including the review of indicators to assess the situation, entailing also the support to design a monitoring and surveillance system for policy dialogue and planning. Other areas include strengthening of the network of institutions to provide support for the development of national capabilities to conduct applied and operational research on issues pertaining to protection and promotion of food and nutrition; incorporation of contents pertaining to food and nutrition security as a right in training activities of public health, medical, nursing and nutrition professionals and dissemination of scientific and technical information.