

Research capacity strengthening in Honduras

A strong research capacity and robust research systems are essential contributors to the health and development of nations.¹ This recognition has prompted significant investments in higher education, research, and innovation in Latin America, a region where health research has traditionally been weak.² Unsurprisingly, this expansion in scientific productivity has not been equally distributed, and most Central American countries are deemed to be scientifically lagging.³

In Honduras, current health research capacity is small. While neighbouring countries take actions to make research a national priority, conditions of extreme poverty, insecurity, and inequity make envisioning the role research plays in society difficult for Honduran leaders. Accordingly, investment in science and technology in Honduras has been abysmally low (roughly 0.04% of the GDP),⁴ which naturally translates into negligible levels of research productivity. Without the research activity that would demand a formal structure, the country has yet to establish a national health research system.²

So, how to boost Honduras's research capacity if so little exists to begin with? Because of the tendency by funders and researchers from developed countries to invest in countries that have some capacity for health research,⁵ with some exceptions, Honduras has been largely overlooked. We are trying to change this trend. Funded by the Global Health Research Initiative of Canada, we have completed a 5-year project of research capacity strengthening at the largest Honduran academic institution, the National Autonomous University of Honduras.

We built and improved on previous models of research

capacity strengthening⁶ and used an integrated approach not only focused on individual researchers or providing technical assistance but also on fostering an institutional environment that is supportive of safe and ethical science. Our main objective was to establish a locally owned research-based MSc programme in infectious and zoonotic diseases to continually educate new generations of researchers. Additionally, we expanded research networks, built a state-of-the-art research laboratory, installed the National Autonomous University of Honduras's first non-medical research ethics board, and led the creation of a biosafety training centre.

We had many obstacles, but 5 years of arduous work have undoubtedly paid off. Students and researchers associated with the project are showing an increased capacity to do research, generate publications, attract funding, and, very importantly, to pursue collaborations with investigators within the region and beyond. Our work in Honduras helped to bridge the proverbial 10/90 gap¹ and increased the demand for a national health research system that would increase the production and quality of health research in the country.² We invite the global community to build on our efforts.

We declare that we have no conflicts of interest.

**Ana L Sanchez, Maritza Canales, Lourdes Enriquez, Ada A Zelaya, Vilma E Espinoza, Gustavo A Fontecha*
ana.sanchez@brocku.ca

Department of Community Health Sciences, Brock University, 500 Glendridge Avenue, St Catharines, Ontario, ON L2S 3A1 Canada (ALS); and Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Honduras, Tegucigalpa, Honduras (MC, LE, AAZ, VEE, GAF)

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