Paraguay’s Local Health Councils Identify Community Concerns

In 1995, The Ministry of Public Health and Welfare (MPHW) in Paraguay, with assistance from USAID/Paraguay, began an experiment to decentralize and increase local control over health sector resources. This decentralization process included the creation of local health councils in ten districts. The district health councils, composed of local healthcare providers and community representatives, will play a key role in implementing health sector decentralization at the local level. These councils channel local participation in decision making about the provision and management of public health services to improve their responsiveness, equity, quality and efficiency—the main objectives of Paraguay’s health sector decentralization effort.

In support of that effort, The Partnerships for Health Reform Project (PHR), in collaboration with USAID/Paraguay and the MPHW, conducted a series of strategic planning workshops in 1996 uniting for the first time representatives of the public sector, town councils, and local community organizations. The workshops served to strengthen community representative participation in decision making and promoted dialogue and consensus among all stakeholders in health sector decentralization from the outset. Other PHR training to strengthen the local health councils in three pilot test districts also helped to meet USAID/Paraguay’s strategic objective of strengthening democratic institutions, systems, and practices.

Local Decision Making and Management

The workshops resulted in the development of detailed action plans for the implementation of programs specific to the concerns of local communities, among others: improving emergency medical services, building sanitation systems, instituting waste management, strengthening public awareness of good hygiene and nutrition, mosquito control. Even more important for the ultimate success of decentralized decision making was the enthusiasm with which all participants engaged in the discussions and committed to the outcomes.

Decentralization in 3 Pilot Districts

Following a PHR assessment of the decentralization process, the MPHW and USAID/Paraguay chose districts with health councils from three different departments to participate in pilot projects: Ayolas in Misiones Department; J.A. Saldivar in Central Department, and Piribebuy in Cordillera Department. The focus of the pilot activities is to enable the health councils to establish and manage effective collaboration among local health care providers, communities and other public and private organizations whose activities have an impact on public health. Furthermore, new cooperation among the district health councils and MPHW and elected officials at the regional and central levels will build capacity at the local level to manage resources and improve service delivery.

Strategic Planning

Plans developed by the three districts needed to be consistent with the view and orientation of national and regional decision makers. Therefore, PHR assisted with organizing a series of four planning and consensus-building workshops, first at the national level, and, subsequently, in each of
the three pilot districts. At each workshop, the MPHW was represented by national, regional, and district officials. Representatives from the Ministry of Finance and the Interior also participated. Elected department and municipal level officials from each department where test districts are located represented their constituents. In addition, the newly formed district health councils each nominated a representative.

PHR used a strategic planning approach to permit all those involved to:

- identify and consider all the factors involved in health sector decentralization
- obtain a common understanding about the roles and responsibilities of district health councils
- outline the objectives of a local development plan.

**Workshop Series: Dialogue and Consensus**

The national strategic planning workshop took place in August 1996. Activities included a careful analysis of national political, economic and socio-cultural factors which participants identified as either positive or negative factors in the process of decentralization. A similar analysis of the internal structure and processes of the MPHW led to a common understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the Ministry for guiding the transfer of decision making to lower levels of government.

Once this common understanding was established, the participants developed a shared vision, objectives, a model for transferring authority and resources to the district level, an implementation strategy, and a national program action plan. The plan addresses the need for activities that will:

- strengthen regional and district capacities for health planning, budgeting, and management along with the establishment of a health information system.

In late 1996, PHR facilitated the presentation of the national plan for decentralization of health services at workshops in each of the three pilot districts. Participants included members of the district health councils, municipal boards, mayors, representatives from the education sector, and community organizations.

**Institutional Development**

In addition to facilitating the strategic planning process, ongoing PHR assistance to the pilot districts has concentrated on the institutional strengthening of the health councils. This assistance includes training members in program development, community involvement, planning and management of priority interventions with funds transferred from the national level, and development of a district information system to monitor activities and their outcomes.

PHR is concluding its technical assistance by conducting a final assessment of the level and type of support needed to sustain the district health councils and a detailed review of the activities undertaken this year in each of the three districts. These results will assist the government in continuing and broadening the process of decentralization to other districts.

For more information on PHR activities in Paraguay contact: Tisna Veldhuyzen van Zanten, PHR/University Research Corporation. See also the following PHR Technical Reports:

- “Assessment of Health Sector Decentralization in Paraguay”
- “Analysis of the Decentralization Process in Paraguay: Department Level”
- “Strategic Plan: Pilot Project for Decentralization in Health”