



**BUILDING LEADERSHIP
IN THE HIV RESPONSE**
IN MEXICO, CENTRAL AMERICA,
AND THE CARIBBEAN

Brief

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Introduction

To lead a strategic, effective, and sustainable response to AIDS, individuals must be equipped with a diverse set of skills. Technical knowledge of HIV and its complexities is not enough; ideally, leaders should also have knowledge of key, related topics, such as stigma and discrimination; practical program and financial management skills; and the relational or “soft skills” needed to influence policy and nurture change.

To build capacity for leadership, the Health Policy Project (HPP), funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), helps individuals and institutions expand their knowledge and skills in policy, advocacy, governance, and finance to (1) efficiently manage programs, (2) make evidence-based decisions, and (3) better advocate for and influence changes in healthcare. For over a decade, the National Institute of Public Health in Mexico (INSP) has also been working to build capacity in these areas. In 2000, INSP—supported by the Mexican government, international cooperation agencies, and academic

institutions¹—began offering a comprehensive suite of courses for emerging HIV leaders in Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean.

“These courses have an impact on the way in which the response to the epidemic is defined, since innovation ultimately comes from those who take these courses and end up occupying positions as decisionmakers.”

~ Mexican physician

To inform INSP's future programming and strategy and strengthen its regional capacity-building efforts, HPP was commissioned to conduct a case study of the INSP program. The study included gathering the experiences and views of alumni² and taking an inventory of management capabilities among HIV program managers in the region. The findings revealed program strengths, as well as challenges and opportunities.

INSP Program Strengths

The INSP program includes a six-module curriculum offered annually, through which students can earn an internationally recognized diploma. A distinguishing element of the institute's approach is the comprehensive and practical nature of the program. The INSP's broad-ranging courses go beyond the usual technical training provided in other HIV-related courses to include topics such as

- Human rights
- Multisectoral coordination
- Advocacy
- Civil society responses
- Program management
- Program monitoring and evaluation
- Conflict resolution

Because most participants primarily have a medical background or similarly narrow field of training, they appreciate the holistic nature of these courses and the opportunity to consider not only the epidemiological and clinical factors of AIDS, but also the social and organizational ones.

Students cited occasions for networking and relationship building as key components of the INSP program. They found the sharing of stories, challenges, and solutions to be particularly useful and reported that these exchanges were further enhanced by the multisectoral nature of the INSP student body (academia, government, civil society). Many students continued to utilize this south-to-south network after course completion to solicit guidance and learn how others had applied the skills and knowledge gained.

Challenges and Opportunities to Strengthen INSP's Program

INSP's diploma modules and individual courses have an excellent reputation in the region, and participation is now seen by some as a pre-requisite to acquiring a leadership position. However, attendance is beginning to decline—in part because scholarships and tuition assistance from government and development partners have diminished. The time commitment is also a limiting factor. In response, the INSP has increased the number of distance-learning courses available and changed the format of the diploma program so that students can complete courses partially on-site and partially online.

More than 550 participants from 32 countries have benefitted from the INSP training program. Many of the heads of Mexico's state AIDS programs, specialized clinics, and hospitals are INSP alumni, as are numerous Caribbean national AIDS program heads, current Members of Parliament, and cabinet ministers.

Based on the findings of HPP's case study, INSP plans to further develop and enhance virtual learning opportunities to reduce both the cost and time commitments required from students. At the same time, it will continue to take active steps to facilitate network creation and strengthening so the benefits of face-to-face interaction are not lost.

INSP endeavors to build capacity at a regional level by offering training in Central America and the Caribbean, where few training options are available for mid- and high-level people working in healthcare.

In collaboration with the University of the West Indies (UWI) and the Caribbean Health Research Council (CHRC), the INSP has designed shorter 11-day versions of the diploma program to make it more accessible and meet the needs of healthcare leaders in these regions.

While alumni appreciate that INSP has filled an important training gap, they suggest that to maximize impact, curricula should consider the unique economic, political, social, and cultural characteristics of individual countries, differences in infrastructure and human resources, and the diverse ways in which the AIDS epidemic manifests across the region. INSP continues to modify and tailor its offerings to meet the needs of the program's diverse students.

USAID-funded projects, starting with the POLICY Project and now HPP, have provided ongoing assistance to the INSP program to strengthen courses in areas related to policy, advocacy, finance, and governance to better prepare future healthcare leaders. This assistance has resulted in

- The program's improved emphasis on and understanding of stigma and discrimination
- The development of courses on skills related to policy monitoring and analysis
- Increased focus on the use of economic tools in strategic and operational planning
- A greater focus on building leadership skills among targeted populations, including national and state program managers and key population networks

During HPP's inventory of management capabilities, program managers expressed a need for more training in topics such as

- Acquisition, management, and resource mobilization
- Lobbying and advocacy
- Personnel recruitment, retention, and training
- Monitoring and evaluation
- Strategic planning

"In my view, the courses have allowed significant changes regarding the way in which we respond to the epidemic especially in the Caribbean region. These courses trained an important number of service providers and administrators that work in HIV. I don't know any other such course that has given that type of training in public health as well as in the practical aspects regarding the response to the AIDS epidemic in the region."

~ Caribbean AIDS program manager

In response, the INSP has added courses in monitoring and evaluation, advocacy, and policy monitoring and continues to work with HPP to further develop the curriculum to meet the needs of healthcare leaders in the region.

Maintaining Influence

The students surveyed feel that INSP's multidisciplinary training approach has fostered a more harmonized response to AIDS. Further, the lessons and tools learned through INSP courses are serving as principal resources for former students who go on to play strategic roles in national and state AIDS programs, as well as in civil society. INSP alumni feel better equipped to (1) make decisions based on available evidence, (2) design and implement strategic prevention and care strategies, and (3) contribute to policy development.

However, challenges remain, and to sustain and expand the program, INSP and other training institutions will have to continue to reduce course costs and required

time commitments, without sacrificing the quality and comprehensiveness that has made them so effective. Options for continued education and virtual support through networking will also be essential.

HPP's case study of the INSP program helped inform the content of the courses and how they are delivered. In addition, INSP and UWI used the findings to win a grant from the MAC AIDS Fund to develop an English version of the diploma course and a series of workshops for civil society on combination prevention, policy monitoring and advocacy, and monitoring and evaluation of combination prevention initiatives. These efforts will further strengthen leadership capacity in the region.

Endnotes

¹ INSP courses have received support from the Ministry of Health and Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Mexico, the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS, Emory University, The Ford Foundation, and the following USAID-funded projects: POLICY Project, USAID | Health Policy Initiative, Health Policy Project, and Measure Evaluation.

² The case study was informed by telephone interviews and email surveys administered to selected INSP alumni, who represented national or state AIDS programs, regional agencies, and academia.

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