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TRIP REPORT

Mexico City
Solis Valley

November 3 - 13, 1984

Hugh Horan, Ph.D.
Nutrition CRSP Program Coordinator

I. Chronology

Saturday, 3 November 6 p.m.: Arrive Mexico City

Sunday, 4 November: free during a.m. p.m., long meeting with Dr. Lindsay Allen, Principal Investigator, and Dr. Harriet Kuhnlein, another human nutritionist.

Monday, 5 November: a.m. meeting with Dr. Adolfo Chavez, Director of Community Nutrition, INNSZ, and Principal Investigator, and Dr. Lindsay Allen. Meeting with Mr. Jeffrey Backstrand, University of Connecticut Data Manager, and Mr. Ramon Lira, Project Data Manager, and Ms. Reyna Rios, project secretary; p.m. with Drs. A. Chavez, L. Allen and Mr. J. Backstrand at greater length.

Tuesday, 6 November: a.m. with Drs. A. Chavez and L. Allen, and Dr. Alfonso Mata, Field Director of the project; p.m. to Solis site, informal greetings and short chats with project personnel.

Wednesday, 7 November a.m. short tour of immediate site, one village, and lengthy talks with Dr. Mata; p.m. lengthy presentation and question-and-answer session with the area chiefs (jefas/jefes de area):

Elsa Molino, diet

Luzmaria Meneses, demography and community relations

Julia Beatriz Cabrera, RMR and anthropometry

Jose Santos, field physicians and clinics

Margarita Mata, laboratory

Kelley Scanlon, activity

Thursday, 8 November: a.m. visits with jefe/jefas to three communities for weekly community team meetings (in San Miguel, San Nicholas, and Calderas), to listen to, and be introduced to, the community teams. p.m. discussions with Dr Lindsay Allen, Mr. Jeffrey Backstrand, Ms. Kelley Scanlon, Mr. Jose Santos, and short interchanges with several other project personnel.

Friday, 9 November a.m. return to Mexico City to de-brief with Dr. Chavez (it was anticipated that Dr. Chavez would have to leave for Indonesia, and that Friday would be our last day to meet with him. As it transpired, his Indonesian trip had to be cancelled). Conference with Dr. Chavez, Dr. Mata, Dr. Allen, p.m. Introduction to Dr. Gretel Pelto, Principal Investigator, and to Dr. Bert (Perttie) Pelto. Informal conversations with the Peltos followed.

Saturday, 10 November Informal meetings with the U.S. project staff throughout the day and the evening.

Sunday, 11 November a.m. free; p.m. meeting and informal discussion with U.S. Principal Investigators.

Monday, 12 November a.m. meetings with Mr. Gabriel Heffes - Cattan, Partner, and Mr. Jorge Lopez-Rodrigo, Manager of the Mexico City branch of Deloitte, Haskins, and Sells, together with Dr. Allen, about synchronizing the INNSZ and UConn accounting systems. Discussions and summaries with Dr. Allen. p.m. lengthy debriefing with U.S. project team, discussion of my observations and findings.

Tuesday, 13 November: a.m. debriefing with Dr. Chavez, then with Drs. Chavez, Mata, and Allen, on my findings. p.m. departure for airport and return flight.

II. Purpose

The trip was for several reasons. Principally, as the new Program Coordinator, I felt a need to come to know the sites and their personnel, so that I could more effectively support their work and more intelligently represent their needs. In addition, it was my hope to be able to make myself useful through applications of my past experience in other countries, insofar as this might be both appropriate and acceptable. It was also my task to convey to the project the concerns of management, and to report back to management the results of my visit.

III. Findings

A. Project strength

Briefly, I am of the opinion that the project has several real strengths. It is, I believe, a superior field project, especially given how large it is and how many workers it has (some 140, as reported to me). These strengths are:

1. The unusually strong national Mexican capability to apply the results of nutritional research in national policy. This is very much in line with CRSP policies as established. Dr. Chavez and INNSZ present, together, an unusual combination of personal and institutional strengths.
2. An unusually solid pool of talented and trained personnel in the field. The Area Chiefs and Field Director are particularly impressive in this regard; smart, creative, extremely hard-working, dedicated.
3. The project personnel and budget are heavily invested in Mexico, in proportions that would gratifyingly meet the expectations of BIFAD's mandate. It is a project with a strong, articulate, vested host country presence at its highest levels, with visible mutual respect among the PIs that I have observed.

In this report, I have deliberately spent most of the space available to deal with the Latin American researchers, for reasons mentioned elsewhere.

This is not to deny the important role played by the U.S. PIs. Given the heavy time commitments in a home institution demanded of U.S. Professors, the amount of time spent in the field has been generous and at some personal sacrifice. It was not possible for me to be at the field site with all the U.S. PIs, but Dr. Allen's investment of the bulk of her sabbatical time has resulted in clear benefits all around -- fluency in Spanish and ease in the field situation being among them. The field collaboration and discussion witnessed between Drs. Mata and Allen seemed solid, goal-oriented, and collaborative.

B. Project weaknesses

The project has also, in my opinion, two weaknesses, one of which is critically important. The project personnel are well aware of the weaknesses, especially the first, and there is good reason to believe that the efforts needed to remedy them will indeed be applied.

The first is that of data flow. For a whole series of reasons, all of them real and understandable, but none of them totally satisfactory explanations, the project is seriously behind in its transmittal of data to UConn and to management.

This has several bad effects, at several levels. Locally it makes for poor morale: researchers need feedback, as the November 1st External Evaluation Panel report remarked, and PIs need information with which to make ongoing operational decisions.

At a less immediate level, planning is impoverished, and the foresightful process of planning the details of a major data analysis task are delayed and made harder to do.

From a management perspective, lack of data flow makes other forms of decision-making difficult-to-impossible to do well.

Data flow, in short, is to a research project what the senses are to the mind in classical psychology: without data, there is nothing to react to, nothing to think about, no way to make good, or wise, decisions and judgment.

All the senior project personnel are keenly aware of this problem, and our lengthy discussions bear promise of its resolution. I will deal with this aspect of it under 'Recommendations', below.

The second problem is the practical and ethical one of trying not to leave the human populations of the study as 'orphans' when it is over. This is something that too often and too easily happens, leaving the researcher as a 'user' of his/her human subjects.

There are two factors in the Solis Valley project that reduce this risk considerably.

The first is the commitment of INNSZ and of Dr. Chavez not to let such a thing happen, and their past history of successful work.

The second is that the Solis communities give me the distinct impression of being far less vulnerable than most such rural communities I have seen. They are, in my view, what we would call in the urban USA, "street-wise" communities.

Nonetheless, however diminished, there is still a risk, and an obligation. Dr. Chavez has assured me of his understanding and special concern in this area, and I am confident that this concern will be addressed successfully.

In reviewing this Findings section, I am aware that the description of 'problems' has been longer than the description of 'strengths'; there is always the tendency to be succinct in mentioning good points, and a practical need to describe any problem area in some detail. This can lead to misinterpretation. Specifically, in this case, I want to underline two points:

1. The data flow problem is serious, and - for the good of all involved - deserves the best attention of us all. (I am assured that it has such priority attention.)
2. This is, nonetheless, a superior field project with a number of impressive achievements under vexing field conditions. The fact that there is a lack of data flow should not distract the reviewer from the other fact, that we are nonetheless in the presence here of a very considerable human achievement.

IV. Kudos

One of the especially pleasant tasks, over the years, in my cartes de visite, or trip reports, has been to single out a few people for 'honorable mentions'. This project has an unusually large number of impressive workers. The ones I will single out will be principally Latin American, and principally field personnel. This is not to deny the achievements of others, but rather to acknowledge people less likely to be in full view of an American academic audience.

Most impressive, to me, would be the Area Chiefs I have seen in action. Ms. Luzmaria Meneses is as good an organizing chairperson as I have seen, both restrained and patient, but also moving business along. Ms. Elsa Molino was a strong jefa in the diet area, one which is in particular need of a strong worker.

Among the M.D.s, I would mention first Dr. Mata, the Field Director. From the experience I have had of the project, I suspect that his unusual ability to work with little sleep and little recreation, his intelligence and creativity, are in no little measure responsible for its success.

Dr. Jose Santos, the chief of the clinics and of the field physicians, was in my view remarkable for his patience and gentleness

in fielding questions and complaints about physicians and about medicine, sensitive areas in any field study where traditional medicine and entrepreneurial pharmacy are also in the picture. In these cases, it is all too easy to be tempted to come on strong "for the people's own good", usually to the detriment of the project in hand. Dr. Santos has been wise enough not to do so.

All of the other Area Chiefs were good. The ones I have singled out are principally the ones I was privileged to work with more.

Exceptionally, I would like to mention a U.S. citizen, Ms. Kelley Scanlon, a UConn graduate student who - in a few months of living on the field site - has learned Spanish quite well for an outsider, earned the trust and confidence of the Latin American field staff, and is in charge of the 'activity' area of the study itself. She is among a handful of Americans, in my experience, in ability and willingness to learn from, and work with, another culture. I hope that she, and others like her, will continue in cross-cultural work.

V. Recommendations

A. Relative to data flow

1. Put all, or as much as possible, of the data capture/data analysis operation at the Solis field site.

This will have, I am convinced, several serious advantages:

- a. It will put the operation directly under Dr. Mata's supervision, where his dynamism and drive will move the operation along faster. Since the responsibility is his, the authority should be also his.
 - b. It will increase the ability, requested in the EEP report of November 1, 1984, of the Area Chiefs and other host country personnel to participate fully in the analysis of the data they have so painstakingly collected.
2. Invest in the equipment proposed by Mr. Jeff Backstrand this project, namely at least one IBM PC-compatible micro computer of superior data analysis ability, with the UPS and other failsafe equipment needed for field use. This is because:
 - a. one Apple IIe in the field, and one IIe and one IIc in Mexico City, are not enough for adequate data capture in the limited time available to us.
 - b. The Apple II's, at their best, are not designed for even minimal data analysis of the types needed for populations as large, and variables as numerous, as required by the Solis project.
 - c. Again in strong concurrence with the November 1, 1984 EEP report, I feel that we all need to work to help strengthen INNSZ, its Field Director, and its Area

Chiefs, so that they can best and most effectively work on the analysis of the data they have collected themselves.

In this connection, I have noted the strong sensitivity of the Latin American investigators to even the appearance of U.S. institutions taking the data they collect, and rendering it inaccessible to them. It is clear that even superior hardware will not respond fully to such culturally-based - and very understandably deep - misgivings. However, the hardware will be a partial response, at least. If it is accompanied by a serious and successful effort to train the Area Chiefs and other appropriate field personnel in the use of these machines, we will at least have made a step in the right direction, both technically and practically. Mr. Backstrand seems both well disposed and capable. He is working on his language skills in Spanish, and will be a patient and a thorough teacher in this area.

3. In general, I would encourage any reasonable attempt to break up the present bottleneck in data flow, especially if it will enhance long-range ability of INNSZ and its field staff to analyze the data they have collected, as well as their willingness to work with U.S. partner institutions again in the future. In this regard, I would strongly encourage the US PIs to continue their heavy time commitment to the project. I am convinced that this effort will continue to pay human and scientific dividends.
4. Finally, I would strongly recommend that this extraordinarily gifted and hard-working group of researchers be given every possible opportunity of continuing their careers and, if needed, their training. Other projects will surely benefit from the skills they have so well learned - and applied - in this CRSP. It would be a loss to us all if such a well-trained and disciplined group were not to continue in their research careers.