



Network for Research and Training of Tropical Diseases in Central America
NeTropica
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NeTboard Minutes
Honduras, La Ceiba
Hotel La Quinta Real
28 February, 2007

NeTboard Members present:

Silda Larios, Nicaragua
Josefa Moran, El Salvador
Annabelle Ferrera, Honduras
Libia Herrero, Costa Rica (Standing in for Rosario Achi)
Olga Torres, Guatemala
Azael Saldaña, Panama

Coordination

Esteban Chaves
Teresa Frisan
Christina Tsagaraki

Participants

Lelany Pineda, Honduran host
Maissa Al-Adhami, Project Coordinator KIRT Program, Sweden

MORNING SESSION:

INTRODUCTION TO THE KIRT PROGRAM:

A brief presentation was given by the NeTropica Coordination and the KIRT representative, on the KIRT program (Karolinska International Research Training Program, <http://ki.se/ki/jsp/polopoly.jsp?d=10727&a=2469&l=en>) emphasizing the fact that it promotes collaboration programs based on mutual scientific interests in all kinds of health-related topics, basic research, as well as clinical studies or research in public health. KIRT's programs focus on research training for the Ph.D. degree (corresponding to four to five years training). The training is conducted as "sandwich" programmes, within the framework of institutional collaboration, where the students have a domestic as well as a Swedish supervisor. One part of the work is carried out in Sweden and another at the home institution.

In 2006, E. Moreno, E. Chaves, C. Tsagaraki (Costa Rica) and C. Monroy (Guatemala) were invited by the Karolinska International Research and Training Committee to represent NeTropica in the 1st International KIRT Conference & 20 years jubilee celebration of KIRT, that took place during October 23-25, Stockholm, Sweden. The different NeTropica presentations made a positive impact to all the conference participants as they reflected the unique NeTropica concept (with successful examples) of promoting collaboration within a whole region and focusing on its specific needs and problems, rather than producing isolated works from individual Universities.

IV BIENNIAL MEETING:

In Nicaragua, during the III Biennial Meeting and the NeTboard (2005) the issue of the urgent need on improving the quality of the scientific participations in the NeTropica Biennials was raised. The Honduran Conference Organizing Committee (represented in the NeTboard by Annabelle Ferrera and as an additional participant by Lelany Pineda) reacted upon this call of the NeTboard and made a significant effort to achieve this. There was a significant presence of scientists not directly related to NeTropica, offering this way an opportunity to spread the possibilities of networking, top quality Guest Speakers were invited and new type of interactions were introduced (Scientific Breakfast Discussions – Meet the Expert - and Researchers Working Sessions). The overall impression of the conference participants and the NeTboard attendees was positive and it was stated that this Meeting was by far the best in scientific quality from the previous events.

Costa Rica has been announced as the host of the next Biennial Meeting (2009). In order to continue improving the quality and organization, the following matters were discussed and recommendations were made.

- Create opportunities for more interaction and discussions, especially after the oral presentations.
- Make a stronger Poster Session: permit power point presentations to accompany the posters, create a competition, assign discussion times, etc
- Research Group Working Sessions: this is a feature that should be continued and be improved in its organization (invitations, setting up of topics, coordination, etc.)
- Meet the Expert: this is a feature that should also be continued and improved in its organization. An emphasis on inviting students to participate should be given.
- A balance between presentations from NeTropica Grantees and non NeTropica presenters must be given. In the past it was obligatory in doing oral presentations, but this year their presence was scarce or limited to posters (not just due to the organization of the meeting, but because many of them did not send proposals). In order to emphasize the results of the NeTropica Grantees, but without separating them by creating a NeTropica section, adding an extra day to the NeTropica Meetings must be considered and a more forceful way in presenting their results (oral or posters) must be implemented.
- Attendance Fellowships - Researchers: for the first time this year a significant change was made in awarding Attendance Fellowships (following the NeTboard recommendations of 2005). Starting from not awarding by default funds to all KIRT members but inviting them to compete for limited positions and incorporating to the same group of competitors former NeTropica Grantees. Competition was based on scientific quality and space availability. A total of 16 spaces was available and a group of 38 (23 KIRT with no active grants and 16 former NeTropica Grantees). Nevertheless only a total of 11 applied, from which 10 got approved. The remaining funds were used by the Organizers to cover expenses of additional top quality guest speakers.
- Attendance Fellowships - Students: An increasing amount of students interested in participating was noted. NeTropica did a formal Call of Applications and 19 applied, with 11 being fully awarded from all Central American countries.
- Actual NeTropica Grantees are normally not being awarded Attendance Fellowships. These expenses are expected to be covered by the Grant. Nevertheless when competing and creating their budgets, this is not always foreseen. This issue has to be strongly monitored by the NeTropica administration guiding the Grantees to allocate the necessary funds. High quality Grantees should create a high quality content for the Biennial Meetings.
- An official thank you letter by the Organizers has to be sent to all the Collaborating Institutions / participants (CYTED, etc).

Specifically for the V Biennial Meeting, in Costa Rica (2009) some logistics issues were raised. Adding an extra day to the Meeting, the fact that Costa Rica is a considerably more expensive country than the rest of Central America the costs of Attendance will be elevated. It is imperative to consider a change of the traditional date of the conference (February, dry season), to the early rainy season where prices might be lower (May).

NETROPICA APPLICATION TO SIDA 2007 - 2009

August 2006 was the NeTropica application submitted to SIDA/ SAREC for the period of 2007 – 2009. The contents of this proposal have been extensively discussed during the previous NeTboard meetings and collaboration in the scientific part was received by NeTropica members. The original proposal was submitted for a total of 15 million Krona. Nevertheless the Swedish representative of SIDA/ SAREC, Pär Svensson requested that this amount to be reduced to 12 million Krona. On December 18, 2006 the application was approved. Currently NeTropica administration is negotiating the details of the transfer of NeTropica to the University of Costa Rica (UCR). The difference between the past and the new applications is the adjustment of the NeTropica scopes and objectives into a pre-existing structure (that of the University) and how to maintain as much as possible the integrity and independence of NeTropica without compromising the University Laws.¹

Some discussion issues regarding the new format of applications were raised again:

- FUNDEVI will be the private foundation that functions independently to handle the funds of NeTropica. The difference between the current FUNA model and FUNDEVI is that the latter one is constituted by the same members of the UCR (the Rector and Vice Rectors, the Municipality, in total of 5 persons). The constitutional law of FUNDEVI states that the Board should be members of the university. In general FUNDEVI charges 5% Overhead on research projects and 15% Overhead for university programs that sell services.
- The advantage of NeTropica being part of the UCR / FUNDEVI model is that it will finally have the lacking academic support.
- The overall administration is foreseen as follows:
 - The NeTboard will continue taking political decisions and proposing courses of action in collaborations, with one representative per country.
 - The University's responsibility will be the overall monitoring of the execution of the project and providing the academic support needed.
 - FUNDEVI will be the financial administrator
 - Central Administration will continue with E. Chaves and C. Tsagaraki
- A certain bureaucratic increase in administration of funds is expected due to the more complex University constitution, but it should be stipulated in the contract with the UCR has no right in assigning funds, replacing administrative members or in general interfering in the normal NeTropica operations.
- SIDA/ SAREC will have the final control of the project (annual reports)
- NeTboard and SIDA/ SAREC will be controlling that the UCR does not convert NeTropica into a Costa Rican project and the regional character is preserved.
- To reinforce the regional issue, NeTropica should be approved by SCUCA. This will also allow the Student Degrees to be easier processed outside Costa Rica and will open the way to NeTropica Administration being transferred outside Costa Rica.

¹ To date, these discussions are still going on and a visit of Pär Svensson at UCR is scheduled for 27 of April. Different models are being discussed including the original one (NeTropica is attached to the Vicerectoria de Investigación or is subscribed directly as a program to FUNDEVI.

- Nevertheless a transfer of NeTropica to a different Central American country implies that already by the year 2008 the interested country should begin making its case, proving a firm structure like FUNDEVI exists, the interest of a public University to support it and the responsible Coordinator to get directly involved in Administration processes, being introduced to Sweden and write the new proposal

STUDENT GRANTS

An opportunity with a University in Argentina is being opened, to receive students from Central America. This is an initiative pursued by the Guatemalan representatives (Olga Torres and Carlota Monroy). The opportunity implies that Argentina will offer a full scholarship to the student, while NeTropica will be offering travelling expenses and research materials. Even though this is a great opportunity many administrative issues must be solved, as it is not foreseen by the current application a direct relation between Central and South America.²

POST Doc PROGRAM

The opening of this program is considered as crucial to give force to CA scientists and boost them to come back and create their own science groups. The current Swedish coordinator, T. Frisan will give the guarantee of high scientific quality. The administrative process of application is being foreseen to be a package: student, professor and project. Not just a component, but the package will give commitment and good level and guarantee of work. For the selection of the candidates Swedish supervisors should also participate. Top scientists should be on both sides, CA & Sweden.

Since the new proposal to SIDA/ SAREC does not include a direct link between KI and NeTropica, to keep a strong impact relation it is necessary to apply together for more funds; this would cause a stronger impact to the granting agencies (perhaps with the European Community or with the M. & B. Gates foundation.). To this direction, of insuring and raising quality the KIRT as a program has started a broader and open call for participants in order to improve the quality from within.

The POST doc Call for applications should really be an open call by presenting the announcement to publications such as the Nature magazine. This will provoke higher standard of competition and will not recycle the same names from the NeTropica list. Applicants should be Central Americans. Of course the risk is weather they will come back to CA, but that also might be positive in the sense that they create some clusters and collaborations with their home countries (example of KIRT graduates, living in North America, but closely working with Central American institutes).

NET-GRANTS

All calls for grants will be realised once the new contract with SIDA/ SAREC is signed and the funds are being securely transferred to FUNDEVI (that might cause a delay up to a year, as all calls were scheduled for the year 2007). All previous NeTboard decisions as to how to award the grants will continue being valid.

² To date this issue is being further discussed with Zaida Yadon (from Brazil, who initially made this offer), E. Chaves and C. Monroy to be presented to Pär Svensson and take further action.

NETBOARD RENEWAL

The current NeTboard has run two consecutive periods (2003 – 2005 - 2007) as it was decided in 2005. The reasoning was that this NeTboard would accompany the process of the application to SIDA/ SAREC. Now that we are entering a new situation, a new NeTboard must be created, as soon as the official signatures between UCR and SIDA/ SAREC.

New members should be invited to participate (rather than having an open voting process as in the past), based on their scientific curriculum, being members of public Universities (to form an alliance with the UCR), language skills, age, knowledge on the NeTropica project and of course time availability and interest in the subject. The ratio of one representative per country should be kept if possible. Nevertheless it was also suggested that not all members change at the same time, but create a “memory” within the board, with practical knowledge accumulated at least among some of the members. This will make easier the flow of the discussions and continuation of the subjects and pressure will be taken off from the Central Administration.

Minutes, 29/3/2007

Christina Tsagaraki

NeTropica Program Assistant