The Canadian Institutes of Health Research – Institute of Population and Public Health (CIHR-IPPH) is delighted to have supported the development and production of this supplement, in which we feature four “environmental scan” research projects funded by the Institute. The Institute of Population and Public Health’s mandate is to support research to further our understanding of the determinants of human health in individuals, communities and whole populations and the application of that knowledge into policies, programs and practices.1

In keeping with this mandate, IPPH issued the Needs, Gaps and Opportunities Assessments (NGOA) Request for Applications (RFA) in 2001-2002. Modeled in part after a number of national and international processes to identify priorities in specific areas of health research, this call for applications was intended to identify Canadian research needs, gaps and opportunities within selected research topics. Specifically, the objectives were as follows:

- Conduct an environmental scan of current and planned research activity and capacity in Canada related to institute-specific strategic priorities;
- Facilitate a participatory consultation process (involving both researchers and research users) concerning the needs, gaps and opportunities within selected research topics.

Specifically, the objectives were as follows:

- Develop, collaboratively with stakeholders across the country, a prioritized list of these research needs/gaps/opportunities using explicit prioritization criteria.
- There are two thematic research areas targeted by the Institute through this RFA. The first is the influence of “context” (i.e., home/family, day care/school, work/recreation, neighbourhood/community) on health over the life course. The second is the design of population-level interventions and evaluation of their health impact, particularly public sector policies and programs, including those in other sectors (such as taxation, housing, regional/urban development policies and programs).

It was anticipated that the scans would ultimately support the development of coordinated and targeted research agendas.

This ensemble of four articles results from syntheses of existing knowledge and collaborative pan-Canadian consultation processes in four areas of relevance to population and public health: (1) social assistance, lone parents and health; (2) housing as a socio-economic determinant of health; (3) income and health; and (4) infectious disease. A variety of complementary methods were used in concert to inform the findings and recommendations summarized in each NGOA report, ranging from literature reviews to stakeholder surveys to regional consultations and key informant interviews, among others.

We trust that the articles and proposed recommendations for action will be of interest to researchers, policy-makers and practitioners in health and other sectors. The knowledge acquired through these initiatives has already informed other Institute funding programs aimed at building strategic research, knowledge transfer and exchange capacity. The authors underscore the need for interdisciplinary, multi-method and cross-sectoral approaches that are required to shine a light on critical population and public health problems. They also reflect on the regional variability in research, knowledge transfer and exchange capacity as well as the socio-political and cultural barriers faced in applying existing knowledge within complex policy environments across the country. We commend their efforts in documenting strengths and gaps in both capacity (e.g., training, data infrastructure) and the evidence base and in proposing the types of research studies needed to advance our understanding in these areas (e.g., quasi-experimental policy intervention research; longitudinal studies). Finally, they signal where concerted public policy action is urgently needed.

**REFERENCE**

1. Canadian Institutes of Health Research-Institute of Population and Public Health. Mapping and

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