attended local conferences in 307 cities and 24 of 27 states. All this led up to Brazil’s National Conference on Science, Technology and Innovation in Health in July 2004, which produced a final health-research agenda.

“As a result of this participatory process, many research topics were added to the agenda and three other sub-agendas emerged,” said the paper’s authors Reinaldo Guimarães, now vice-president of the Ministry of Health Research Institute (Fiocruz), and Leonor Maria Pacheco Santos, Antonia Angulo-Tuesta and Suzanne Jacob Serruya, who are coordinators at the Ministry of Health’s Department of Science and Technology. These included oral health, the health of African descendants and the health of the disabled.

Community involvement “was massive and represented a big challenge”, Pacheco said. “For instance the lobby of groups of patients with rare diseases was strong and they were not always completely happy with the results. On the other hand, some scientists who were not used to debate with community representatives had a hard time [communicating] in lay terms ... But, in my opinion, the conference represented a very important democratic learning process.”

Calls for proposals were launched for programmes on violence, accidents and trauma; food security and nutrition; hantavirus and similar viruses; health systems and policies; maternal and neonatal mortality; oral health; cardiac stem-cell research; and support for local research ethics committees.

Nearly 1400 proposals were received and 402 financed. One will study 300 cardiac patients with Chagas disease, a parasitic infection that causes heart and other internal-organ damage. “These patients in general come from very poor areas and would have, otherwise, very limited therapeutic options,” said Pacheco. “This research initiative would probably not seem interesting for researchers from developed countries, because the disease is very rare in the North.”

PHRplus is organizing referendums in three other regions of Peru, using a system of representation in hard-to-reach jungle areas, Habich said.

Experts said a mix of public participation and epidemiological study is key to accurately assessing health priorities.

“There has been a long debate in development about how to get more public engagement in deciding on what health priorities and health services are needed, both in rich countries and poor countries,” said Dr Phyllida Travis, a WHO health systems adviser.

Citing an example in the Oregon, United States, in which residents were asked to choose what they would pay for from a list of health services, she added: “No single approach to setting priorities is sufficient, neither just the epidemiological approach, nor the communities. There are always inequalities in information on both sides of the equation.”

Theresa Braine, Mexico City

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