Celebrating 10 Years of the Global Observatory for Physical Activity—GoPA!

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The Global Observatory for Physical Activity (GoPA!) is a grass roots network consisting of many of the best physical activity researchers, policy makers and practitioners from around the world.1 As an independent, democratic, and informal organization committed to an evidence-based approach to public health, its mission is to monitor physical activity surveillance, research, and policy worldwide, with the ultimate goal of reducing the global burden of mortality and morbidity caused by physical inactivity. GoPA! was conceptualized during the first Lancet Physical Activity Series in 2012. It quickly evolved into a global initiative, starting its operations in 2014.1,2 Over the past decade, it has demonstrated a remarkable track record of publications that contribute to the development of local, regional, and global capacity building.1–10 GoPA! has consistently generated and analyzed reliable, high-quality, and up-to-date global data on physical activity.5 Additionally, it has engaged in the training of more than 25 international master’s and PhD students.4

In recently published articles in the Journal of Physical Activity and Health we see five examples of the type of work supported by GoPA!.6–10 These papers reflect not just excellent research carried out and published by mid and early career researchers from low- and middle-income countries (Adewale Oyeyemi, Nigeria; Eduardo Ribes Kohn, Brazil; Eugen Resendiz, Mexico; Juliana Mejía Grueso and Andrea Ramírez Varela, Colombia), but the maturation of GoPA! into a true multinational network and data source that can be tapped for high quality research publications much like other long running international studies and cohorts.

Oyeyemi et al7 analyzed the evolution of physical activity research in Africa from 1950 to 2019, identifying >500 publications coming from 47 African countries. Interestingly, >80% of these papers were published in the last decade analyzed (2010–2019), most were observational, and few were classified as intervention or policy articles. The number of articles per country was positively related to the proportion of the gross domestic product spent on research and development. The findings can serve as a standard for assessing the progress of research in Africa and to identify areas that require improvement.

Using data from a systematic review of physical activity and health publications from 1950 to 2019 conducted by GoPA!,3 Kohn et al8 showed a desirable upward trend in the participation of females in the authorship of physical activity scientific publication. For example, the proportion of female first authors in the field increased from less than 10% in the early decades analyzed to 55% between 2010 and 2019. However, there is still a gap in the participation of female researchers as last authors. Addressing this gap will significantly contribute to more inclusive and impactful scientific advancements in our field.

The development of the Interaction between National and Local Government Levels in Development and Implementation of Physical Activity Policies Tool (INTEGRATE PA-Pol) is described in the article by Resendiz et al.9 It was created to examine the development and implementation of national and subnational physical activity policies and the (mis)alignment between government levels. The tool consists of six questionnaires assessing how national and subnational governments collaborate to develop and implement physical activity promotion policies. The INTEGRATE-PA-Pol tool and its scoring system was then applied in Colombia, Costa Rica, Mexico, and Ecuador as described by Mejía Grueso et al.10 The findings of the study revealed that most key informants reported the presence of physical activity within noncommunicable diseases prevention plans of their respective countries. While physical activity promotion was regarded central at the subnational level by the informants, those at the national level considered it important but not central. Also, the coordination between national and subnational policymakers in the processes of developing physical activity policy is currently suboptimal. This research reinforced the feasibility of collaboratively gathering policy data across countries and government levels through the GoPA! Network.

Finally, the paper by Ramírez Varela et al6 described highly cited and high altmetric publications in physical activity research and explored their impact on physical activity policy and practice using a mixed-methods approach. Interviews revealed that important factors in disseminating findings and influencing physical activity policy and practice were the importance of the peer-reviewed manuscript, the journal’s reputation, the communication strategies, and leveraging online platforms. However, successful translation of research into real-world impact goes beyond just publishing. To truly engage policymakers and communities in applying the evidence and assessing its impact on policy and practice outcomes, future efforts need to focus on co-creation, co-dissemination, advocacy, and capacity building. These collaborative actions are crucial to driving positive changes in the field.

But GoPA! is also different from its well established “peer” studies. GoPA! is an observatory focused on comprehensive...
epidemiologic surveillance for one of the most important but underappreciated aspects of health, physical activity. GoPA! collects data to advance public health programs and policy for physical activity. It is a classic surveillance system in that it is action oriented. Of course, there are also insights to be gained from the cornucopia of high-quality data coming from more than 160 countries that may be translated into interesting research publications such as those that we see recently published in the Journal of Physical Activity and Health. The future of GoPA! is bright as a clear understanding of the status of research, surveillance, and policy related to physical activity remains central to enhancing global health. GoPA! is also broadening its efforts to include physical education, sedentary behavior, and environments that impact physical activity. Each of these new initiatives bubbled up from incredibly committed Country Contacts with the support of a vast network, with leadership provided by young investigators from around the world. Diverse and dynamic, GoPA! is celebrating a decade of growth and looks forward to an exciting second decade.

References

7. Oyeyemi AL, Ramírez Varela A, Lambert EV, Kohn ER, Hallal PC, Pratt M. An overview of physical activity research evolution in Africa: the Global Observatory for Physical Activity—GoPA! J Phys Act Health. Published online February 27, 2024. doi:10.1123/jpah.2023-0455