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Contributing to the development of science in Latin America

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The meeting of the Panel of Experts in Latin America on the Development of Science, organized by UNESCO, opened on 6 September 1948, in Montevideo (Uruguay), pursuant to a decision adopted by the General Conference of UNESCO at its second session (Mexico City, December 1947). It was the first of its kind and resulted from the application of the “periphery principle” underlying the programmes of the Natural Sciences Department.

Some 15 scientists from ten countries, including the Argentine Nobel Prize-winner Bernardo Houssay and three Brazilians (Miguel Ozorio de Almeida, Enrique Rocha e Silva and Joaquim Costa Ribeiro), attended the UNESCO meeting, together with representatives of the International Labour Office, the Rockefeller Foundation, the Organization of American States and the Smithsonian Institution. The participants stressed the relevance of discussions rooted in the reality of countries seeking scientific development.

Three basic lines of emphasis emerged from the meeting: the need for UNESCO to assist in the development of research on basic scientific issues in Latin American countries; the establishment of a “full-time” employment system for researchers (who had previously been obliged to hold several jobs); the development of scientific institutions and their coordination at the national level. The first attempt to establish a UNESCO science cooperation office for Latin America, at Rio and Manaus, had failed because it had been confused with the International Hylean Amazon Institute, its only activity (with the same director). The decision was therefore taken to establish at Montevideo a new Field Science Cooperation Office, and its first director, appointed in 1949, was Angel Establier.¹ This Regional Office still exists.

In Brazil, that meeting is viewed as having played a pivotal role in the establishment of the National Research Centre (CNPq, for which a bill was tabled in early 1949). The Brazilian Society for Scientific Progress (SBPC), established in 1948, drew on the UNESCO’s Field Science Cooperation Office in Montevideo and adopted its initiatives. International scientific cooperation through UNESCO was the central theme of SBPC’s second annual meeting (November 1950).

Sources:

- UNESCO Archives, LACDOS (Latin American Conference for the Development and Organisation of Science);
- Work by Shozo Motoyama, science historian (Universidade de São Paulo), on the establishment of CNPq;
- SBPC’s *Ciência e Cultura* journal, 1948 to 1950.

¹ Angel Establier, biochemist, Spanish republican, had been, as from 1931, assistant to the director of the “Sciences” section of the International Institute for Intellectual Cooperation. He was subsequently the first liaison officer between UNESCO and ICSU in 1947 and 1948.