Sanitation in Developing Countries

Proceedings of a workshop on Child in Lobatse, Botswana, 7-12 August 1980
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Sanitation in Developing Countries

Proceedings of a workshop on training held in Lobatse, Botswana, 14–20 August 1980

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Community/Household Participation

A.W.C. Munyimbili

To introduce this paper it is useful to quote a paragraph from a paper presented by an officer from the Office of the President and Cabinet (Development Division) during our national seminar on primary health care, 30 October – 3 November 1978. This quote embodies the present practice of rural development in Malawi:

"Rural development is an essential and integral part in the overall Government effort to improve the living conditions of the ordinary man and woman in the village. Rural development entails the provision of basic services in rural areas aimed at raising the standard of living of the ordinary people so that they become productive elements of society. We in the Development Division of the Office of the President and Cabinet, with the financial assistance of both local and external donors, are committed to the provision of these basic facilities in the rural areas, which include roads, health facilities, schools and water through the agency of the District Development Committees which are established in all districts of the country. The District Development Committees have played and still are playing a vital role in this field. In our approach to rural development we recognise the fact that services are more effective if in their planning and implementation they take into account the inter-relationship between health, water supply, nutrition, education, community development, social welfare services and also the interrelationships between these and other aspects of national development. It is also recognised that careful, coordinated planning in rural development will save time, tempers, energy and funds when projects are in progress. Departmental differences can bring about the death of development. All departmental officers must play their part and work as a team if we are to succeed in solving the problems we are addressed to."

This paragraph can best be explained by the organizational diagram shown in Fig. 1.

Village action committees are usually formed to carry out a specific task. When a problem is identified, e.g., lack of water, a subcommittee is formed to seek ways and means of solving it. If the solution to the problem is not within the scope of the village committee, it is referred to the area action committee and so on through the district development committee to the Development Division of the Office of the President and Cabinet.

Government instructions are then transmitted via the area action groups and village action groups to be disseminated at the grass roots level. All of the activities of the area and district development committees are coordinated at the national level by the national development committee.

Why and How Local People are Involved in the Various Committees and Programs at Area and Village Levels

(1) The involvement of the people leads to commitment to the program, i.e., the people involved regard the program as theirs...
Fig. 1. Organization of Malawi Development Division.
and not as one that has been imposed upon them.

(2) When people are involved, it is a learning experience for them because the people involved are able to develop leadership skills and new attitudes that will help them convince others to accept the programs or innovations.

(3) The local people are more capable of identifying some of their problems and are more capable of identifying some of the possible solutions to their problems than someone from outside.

(4) Not all of the people can become involved in the planning of a program at the local level. Only a selected few, who represent the interests of the community, become involved. Although the selection of the people to be involved may vary from one area to another and one situation to another, there are general guidelines that need to be followed in the selection of these people: (a) they should be people who are interested in the activities of rural development; (b) they should already be in positions of leadership; and (c) preferably they should have special knowledge or resources to offer to the committee, e.g., a retired health officer or agricultural officer may have valuable ideas to offer to the committee.

As soon as the participating committee has been formed, it may be necessary that they undergo an orientation. This is necessary so that the members (1) become acquainted with each other; (2) get to know their own roles and responsibilities as well as the roles of their related committees, e.g., the community development officer or health inspector explains to the members what is involved in the work and its limitations; (3) set up the objectives and the limitations of the community; and (4) select the office bearers. Most of the committee members may not be familiar with what is involved in setting up a program. Training, therefore, may be necessary dealing with becoming effective leaders in their communities and the development of a program advocating change.

Examples of Community Work

The Increasing Problem of Domestic Water
With the growth in population and the increase in cultivation, rivers and wells are drying up earlier in the year, making water supply more and more of a problem.

Piped-Water Project
More than 2 million people in Malawi live near highlands and in the past have obtained water from the water holes of nearby rivers or streams.

In self-help gravity-piped water projects, the Ministry of Community Development, in cooperation with other ministries, e.g., the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Health, have developed a technique for motivating the people to dig trenches and also to construct tap aprons in their villages. The same approach was adopted for the construction of village wells.

Water committees were set up in each village. The leaders and all of the village headmen walked to the river to observe the intake, and also to determine where the pipe would go and to discuss the problem. Reluctantly, they agreed to dig the pipeline if the government would supply the pipe. The villagers were in doubt as to how water would flow without a mechanical device. When the pipeline was completed and carefully executed to ensure that every village got water, fears were dispelled.

Piped System
The piped system can be compared to the branches of a tree, where the branches get smaller and smaller as they get further from the source. In larger projects, there are as many as 600 taps radiating out from one source. Presently, there are 2000 village taps that the villagers themselves have installed by laying 900 mi (1450 km) of piping. These taps serve 300,000 rural people. Other areas are being served by piped-water schemes.

Village Health Committees
Like the village water committee or village agricultural committee, a village health committee could be described as a subcommittee of the village action com-
mittee, the former being charged with the responsibility of looking into activities pertaining to the improvement of village health, such as assessing the sanitary facilities in villages, health education, and infectious-disease control for diseases such as cholera, measles, typhoid, tuberculosis, and bilharzia.

**Guidelines for Village Health Committees**

A village health committee is a group of people who are elected by the community and approved by the local leaders for the purpose of leading, guiding, and helping people in all aspects of health improvements within the village. The members are elected to represent the people in the village and make decisions on their behalf. As mentioned earlier, not everyone can be involved in decision making. Those elected are considered to have the will to help everybody and not just themselves or just a few. They must be people who have a lot of initiative. Because the elected people will serve their community, it is important that they are elected by the community. They should not be nominated or selected by one man or woman despite any position they might hold in that particular village. The election system must be by vote (the counting of hands). The people elected must then be approved by local leaders, i.e., village headmen or the Malawi Congress Party chairman.

**Why have Village Health Committees?**

Since the outbreak of cholera in Malawi in 1973, more methods and efforts to control the disease are being tried in the field. The methods applied are aimed at improving village sanitation. These include the provision of safe water supplies, proper pit latrines, provision and use of refuse pits, and teaching people simple rules of personal hygiene. One way of doing this is to establish village health committees. This idea has been put into effect since 1974. The committees work as tools to extend health activities in the villages and rural areas as a whole.

The duties of a village health committee may be summarized as follows: (1) to report on any infectious disease outbreak within the village; (2) to organize people during health campaigns and health education meetings; (3) to see to it that gastroenteritis/cholera patients and any other patients are taken to treatment centres without delay; (4) to encourage and increase local participation in rural health programs through the committee's network; (5) to let people know that they are part and parcel of health improvements in the village; (6) to help identify the health problems within the village; (7) to help the health staff in the field to carry out their activities properly; (8) to be responsible for the provision of accommodation to health staff, e.g., cholera assistants, during an infectious disease outbreak in the area; and (9) to be responsible for water chlorination in the villages, e.g., wells and pot-to-pot chlorination.

**How to Conduct Elections**

The entire village is involved in the election and this is the only stage where an entire community is assembled to choose the leaders from among themselves. The village headman and Malawi Congress Party chairman (branch) should conduct the elections under the guidance of a technical assistant. The two former leaders must ask the technical assistant to explain fully all details about the election and the committee. This should be done before the election and the explanation should include election procedures, i.e., one vote per person; qualifications required by officers and members; and the importance of the committee within the village.

The village headman and the Malawi Congress Party chairman for the branch should be members of the committee, because these people are already heads of the village and the committee will work under the umbrella of the two leaders. Any other members in the village are eligible to be elected. Thus, the elected members of the village health committee consist of chairman, vice chairman, secretary, vice secretary, treasurer, and vice treasurer.

Four of these people should be women. In addition to the elected positions, the following people should always be part of the committee: the village headman; Malawi Congress Party branch chairman; technical assistant, e.g., health assistant, cholera
Examples of the Responsibilities of the Village Health Committees

Members of the village health committees are subjected to a growing awareness of health problems because of increasing population and settlements in the rural areas. They are briefed on the problems that hinder the conversion of villagers from traditional beliefs to new technical approaches to health problems and they foster a sense of responsibility within the community during the control of infectious diseases or when living conditions are dangerous to health. The success of any vaccination campaigns, such as vaccinations against measles or polio, cannot succeed effectively if their respective purposes are not fully explained by the village health committee members to the people of the communities. For example, in supplemental piped-water schemes, the Ministry of Health emphasizes that through the village health committees, as many communities as possible should gain access to safe and clean water and discourages communities from obtaining their drinking water from suspicious sources such as rivers or dams. Thus, it is an easy and logical step for these committees to undertake the construction of a protected spring or well if they are given suitable assistance to enable them to do so. The technical assistant, with the help of the committee, works out an estimate of the entire well or spring project, i.e., what the village health committee will do and what the government will supply.

Conclusions

This paper has shown in detail how the community is involved at all levels, utilizing the existing leadership structure. The importance of a motivated field staff, who are the link between the government and the people and who provide the necessary supervision, has also been stressed. As a result of this involvement and because of its basic importance to the success of the program, a sense of pride and ownership in the project is generated within the local community.

It should also be noted that rural committees have been cautious of innovations until these innovations have been tried and shown to be appropriate to rural conditions; something that has taken years to do by the departments and people concerned through trial and error methods.