Assessing health opportunities: a course on multisectoral planning

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Multisectoral planning can yield major benefits for health, especially in the case of water resource development projects. A two-week course, designed to involve mid-level officers from at least six government ministries in the planning and implementation of such projects, has been tested in Ghana, the United Republic of Tanzania, and Zimbabwe.

Projects which change the environment are complex and touch on the responsibilities of many government sectors. The relevant personnel are usually specialists who are unfamiliar both with the work of those in other fields and with the art of communicating with them. There are usually few or no links between the officers in different government departments.

A typical scenario might be as follows: a plan to develop water resources is drawn up and put into effect by sectors such as irrigation, hydropower or agriculture. Then various things happen: the additional surface water provides breeding sites for vectors, and it increases human exposure to waterborne diseases. Malnutrition occurs as local food resources change or vanish. New diseases start appearing, associated with new practices such as the use of agrochemicals. The health sector, which was not consulted about the project before, is now expected to provide and pay for the treatment of those harmed by it.

During the design, construction, operation and maintenance of water resources projects, there are many opportunities to safeguard and actually promote human health through such measures as preventing vector breeding, solving sanitation problems, and providing drinking-water, health facilities and health education. To take advantage of these opportunities, changes are needed in the planning process. A procedure called “health opportunity assessment” has been designed to do this, as a component of the more general practice of making an environmental impact assessment.

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To help ensure that health opportunity assessment becomes a part of the planning process, an 18-day residential course has been designed for the relevant government officials. The course takes a task-based learning approach and has no formal lectures. It was developed jointly by three organizations: the Danish Bilharziasi Laboratory (DBL); the joint WHO, FAO, UNEP and UNHCS (Habitat) Panel of Experts on Environmental Management for vector control (PEEM); and the Health Impact Programme (HIP) of the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine. During its development, the course was run on a trial basis in Zimbabwe (1992), Ghana (1994), and the United Republic of Tanzania (1995). The usefulness of this course at an intercountry level will be explored when it is held in Honduras in 1996.

**Course objectives and content**

The overall objective is to train participants from different disciplines and sectors to incorporate a public health component in the planning and implementation of a water resource development project. The course-work is broken down into six tasks:

- constructing a comprehensive decision-making framework for all water projects;
- organizing a rapid initial health opportunity assessment;
- technically appraising a completed assessment;
- evaluating it economically;
- formulating generic terms of reference for health opportunity assessments;
- planning for intersectoral monitoring of a development project.

The course does not attempt to make the participants technical experts in health assessment. The aim is rather for them to be able to manage the work of technical experts by setting good terms of reference, appraising reports and acting on recommendations.

The course sets out to convince mid-level officials from at least six different ministries that it is possible and can even be pleasant to collaborate with colleagues from different professions and ministries in making reasoned decisions about the health opportunities inherent in a proposed water resource development project. To do this, they have to arrive at decisions in an area in which none of them commands total expertise.

The chief skill needed for this kind of collaboration is communication, which includes the ability to listen to and understand what others say, request further information, put forward a different point of view, negotiate towards agreement, and resolve conflicts. Those who take the course should therefore at least be sufficiently sure of themselves in their own profession to request or give information, which is the currency of power. To enable them to build up mutual respect and confidence, they are assigned to teams made up of one person from each ministry involved.

Each team works separately on the six tasks listed above, reporting back frequently for feedback and discussion with the others. The tasks are carried out in the context of a selected planned development project, and the course includes visits to the project site and the local health centre, with an opportunity to interview people living in the area. For each of the tasks, a tangible output is required, such as a report setting out the group's decisions. The time allowed for each task is deliberately kept short, as working under a time pressure
speeds up the group bonding process and reflects the real-life conditions. The plenary meetings are held in a relaxed and informal way, which allows the participants to exchange supplementary information and views.

The most important role of the course tutors is to provide moral support and foster constructive interaction. They participate fully in the work of the teams, initially acting as chairperson until the group evolves its own structure and leadership. They also act as time-keepers and ensure liaison with the course director.

**Evaluation and next steps**

The course includes an evaluation component, which focuses on its acceptability, effectiveness and efficiency. Acceptability is measured by the participants’ opinions on the usefulness of the various parts of the course. Effectiveness is judged by the quality of the final task reports, prospects for fruitful intersectoral collaboration in the future, and the tutors’ rating of the cohesion achieved while carrying out the tasks. The course’s efficiency is assessed on the basis of the time and money actually spent on it in relation to the budget and the expected benefits. The results of the evaluation are then used to modify the course for future use.

A single intervention of this kind makes no measurable impact on the way things are done. To improve development planning, it should be repeated at regular intervals, draw in an increasing number of relevant officials, and be sustainable. For this purpose it should be established as part of a local management training centre which has the necessary facilities for carrying out the course work and accommodating the staff and participants. The course should be run on a cost-recovery basis, with the ministries concerned paying for each participant they send. In addition, since the course is based on concrete tasks, the training centre needs to have access to feasibility studies of local development projects.

In order to make the course sustainable at country or intercountry level, the number of external experts used for it has been progressively reduced and the number of local consultants increased. Guides have been written for the use of the various people involved in organizing and running the course. They have been made as generic as possible so that they can be used anywhere in the world in conjunction with a local water resources development programme.

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