

Roles and approaches of nongovernmental organizations in health development

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The use of a systems model of rural society for analysing the roles and approaches of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in health development is outlined, with special reference to conditions in northern Thailand. Comparisons are drawn between approaches in the fields of relief and welfare, community development, sustainable systems development, and people's movements.

A review of community health development projects of both governmental and nongovernmental organizations in northern Thailand showed that the workers involved considered participation, sustainability, integration and cultural sensitivity to be essential for success. They also felt that the members of the communities were in the best position to say what kinds of improvements were needed.

Systems model

A systems model of rural society (1) was used to analyse the roles and approaches of nongovernmental organizations in health development which had been observed during the review. According to this model there are two primary systems in rural societies: a delivery

system comprising governmental and nongovernmental agencies and individuals providing goods and services, and an acquisition system comprising the members of the societies and their representatives who request and receive these goods and services. If the links between the systems are strong it should be possible to fulfil the societies' needs and desires.

For example, in a village where there is a high infant mortality rate attributable to diarrhoea, a women's group might appeal to local health officials for assistance, who might respond by providing oral rehydration packs and education on the subject. Unfortunately, however, the links between delivery and acquisition systems are often weak. The women's group might be unaware of the help obtainable from the officials, who in turn might not know about the diarrhoea problem.

Furthermore, what is delivered may not reflect need but only the perceptions of the delivery system as to what is needed, or even its own needs and desires. There is often a

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tendency for rural people and their representatives passively to accept whatever comes to them. Local officials may simply implement national health policies without regard to actual requirements in particular communities.

Clearly, acquisition systems should enable rural communities to express their needs to the greatest possible degree, and delivery systems should be able to respond adequately. Nongovernmental organizations can help to achieve this state of affairs by strengthening both systems and the communication between them. For instance, a women's group such as that mentioned above might not be able to identify the causes of diarrhoea, or know how to devise solutions, or whom to contact for assistance. In this situation a nongovernmental organization might enter the picture as a stimulation system with the aim of enabling the women to act effectively.

Nongovernmental organizations may also seek to influence delivery systems so that they respond appropriately with the required goods and services by:

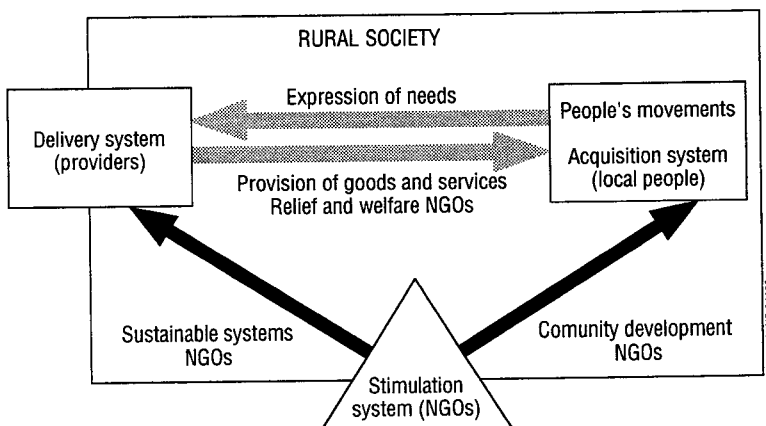
- assisting with an assessment or sample survey of community needs;
- training providers in health education methods, health programme management, and the development of information systems.

The systems model can help nongovernmental organizations to decide where they can make their greatest contributions in rural communities. Their decisions depend on their organizational purposes, their capabilities and the demands of the local situations with which they are confronted. It has been suggested (2) that the main approaches adopted by nongovernmental organizations to development are in the fields of:

- relief and welfare;
- community development;
- the development of sustainable systems;
- people's movements.

These approaches are considered in relation to the systems model (see figure).

Development approaches of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in a rural society



Relief and welfare

In this approach, the nongovernmental organization supplements the delivery system because services are inadequate. The organization becomes part of the delivery system, and the community participates as a recipient of

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services. Thus, in northern Thailand's Chiang Mai Province, the mobile family planning clinics of McCormick Hospital began serving rural areas in the 1950s in response to requests from local communities. The role of the mobile clinics declined as government hospital clinics opened throughout the region, and ended in 1987.

The relief and welfare approach can meet immediate needs, e.g., by supplying food where malnutrition occurs, and can provide services that would otherwise be unavailable, but it has the following drawbacks:

- the programmes are not sustainable;
- they do not lead to self-reliance;
- they have no indigenous multiplier effect because of the tendency to rely on outside funding;
- they tend not to address the causes of problems, e.g., a failure on the part of communities to produce adequate amounts of food for themselves;
- they are sometimes very localized.

A relief and welfare project should be well focused in terms of geography, target population, and type of intervention, and should be planned to continue only until the delivery

system can meet the targeted need. The primary criterion being need, the goal of reaching the most needy should be central to the planning process.

Community development

In the community development approach, a nongovernmental organization, acting as a stimulator and working in partnership with communities, may strengthen groups and organizations at village level in the acquisition system so that they are enabled to solve their own problems. In this context the role of the nongovernmental organization is mainly to facilitate and support activities conducted by community members.

This approach has been adopted by the Friedrich Naumann Foundation in its integrated rural development projects in three northern provinces of Thailand. The Foundation sees all aspects of rural life as interrelated, including health, agriculture, education and livelihood, and its projects encourage community involvement in activities. Heavy reliance is placed on education, training and demonstration (3).

The community development approach undoubtedly has the potential for producing more sustainable progress at the local level than does the relief and welfare approach, because of the higher degree of community participation which it elicits. In Thailand there are persistent health problems at community level, despite the existence of large numbers of physicians and other health personnel. The scale of these problems can be reduced if communities are enabled to tackle them and their causes (4). For instance, malnutrition can be diminished by helping people to produce, acquire and consume adequate quantities of suitable foods.

Of course, results are slower to become apparent than in the relief and welfare approach, and this may present difficulties where donors wish to see benefits quickly. The impact of a project based on the community development approach may be limited to a relatively small area of a country. Furthermore, the advantages of the approach, namely increased community participation and sustainability, can be lost if nongovernmental organizations adopt a leadership role instead of one of partnership, and this eventuality has to be guarded against. Unfortunately, many so-called community development projects do no more than deliver goods and services.

Nongovernmental organizations using the community development approach should concentrate primarily on helping people to identify, analyse and solve their own problems. They may also consider it advisable to deliver some services, in which event they should allow for community participation and should anticipate discontinuation of the services when they are no longer needed. A nongovernmental organization may well move on to sustainable systems development if it recognizes that the delivery system, in the shape of local providers, needs to be strengthened so that the needs of more communities can be better served.

Sustainable systems development

In this approach the nongovernmental organization functions as a catalyst to strengthen the institutions that provide services. It looks beyond the local causes of health problems, such as inadequate food production and poor knowledge of appropriate foods, to political, social and institutional factors. Thus it might assist institutions and organizations to deliver improved services, and to play a more active role in enabling communities to solve their problems.

In Thailand a special committee coordinates the efforts of nongovernmental organizations involved in health development and facilitates their sharing of methods and information on public health. It also conducts campaigns on breast-feeding, AIDS, drug use, occupational and environmental health, and other matters. The committee produces a newsletter and a quarterly magazine, and organizes seminars, conferences and training sessions.

Sustainable systems development addresses the social factors responsible for health problems in large populations. This is achieved by supporting local organizations involved in community development. Coordination between local bodies and government agencies helps to reduce duplication of effort. A weakness of the approach is that nongovernmental agencies using it experience diminished contact with people at the community level.

Nongovernmental organizations which are interested in sustainable systems development should make sure that there are solidly maintained linkages and partnerships between communities and local institutions. If this is the case the nongovernmental bodies can focus on broader issues, including ones at the regional and national levels. It is important to undertake networking with community development organizations and other bodies

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to facilitate the sharing of information on needs, lessons learned and resources. The focus should be on support for nongovernmental organizations and government

agencies involved in direct action, not on the direct provision of services.

People's movements

People's movements for the solution of health problems do not require the planned intervention of nongovernmental organizations, which, however, can assume a background

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role whereby the people's organizations are supported in their efforts. The main actors are people belonging to local communities, working to express their needs for goods and services to the delivery system. These people can also enter into partnership with nongovernmental organizations to stimulate changes in delivery systems.

People's movements can use community health development as a platform for promoting self-reliance in problem-solving, indicating their needs to providers of health services, and influencing policies, plans and programmes (5). The anti-smoking campaign is a good example of an international people's movement. Community members in many parts of the world have come to realize that smoking is harmful to health, and have consequently altered their behaviour, sponsored health education campaigns and urged changes in policy on the authorities. Non-smoking environments have been established in many public places.

Participation and sustainability are core elements of people's movements, which grow as the people themselves work to improve their quality of life. However, it is necessary to

guard against takeovers by special interest groups seeking to advance their own purposes. People's movements cannot be developed in accordance with a blueprint but can be encouraged to pursue their goals and increase the effectiveness with which they conduct their activities.

In order to bring the four approaches together, let us examine how they might apply to an instance of protein-energy malnutrition in a rural community.

- A nongovernmental organization adopting the relief and welfare approach might choose to provide supplementary feeding, thus meeting the immediate need for improved nutrition.
- A nongovernmental organization involved in community development might help the local people to analyse the problem, concentrating on its root causes in the community. It might then assist the community to decide how to deal with the situation; this might involve growing a greater diversity of crops or conducting an educational programme on healthy eating.
- A nongovernmental organization interested in the development of sustainable systems might promote coordination and networking among local organizations and government agencies concerned with improving nutrition at community level. It might also promote the adoption of policies supporting food production.
- A people's movement might be supported by a nongovernmental organization in efforts to secure access to health services in communities.

Each of the approaches can play an important part in health development. A nongovernmental organization can combine different

approaches provided it is clear about its goals, the roles it desires and can fulfil, and the ways in which communities can become involved. A nongovernmental organization, on moving from providing relief and welfare to supporting a people's movement, becomes less central; community members, on the other hand, become more active and central to the development process.

Nongovernmental organizations, and the people working with them, should recognize that there is a range of approaches to development. It is important to identify the most suitable approach in each set of circumstances so that the roles to be adopted can be clarified and effectiveness maximized. ■

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Managerial efficiency in primary health care

To achieve greater efficiency [of health service delivery], especially at the community level, it is necessary to investigate how total and unit costs differ among facilities at a given time, and how they vary for the same facility over time. Analysing these costs to find the factors that affect them is not easy, especially when concepts such as the quality of care and the possible effects of population characteristics and geographical variables are taken into account. Nevertheless, major cost differences at "outliers" (sites that stand out at one extreme or the other) can be particularly worthy of investigation.

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