

## Actions and Activism in Fostering Genuine Grassroots Participation in Health and Nutrition

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*-Effective action requires not just a feeling or enthusiasm, but calls for a close rapport with the disgruntled so as to get them organized.*

As public health nutritionists or development workers in other fields, you may often have asked yourself as to whether your individual contribution to development in the field of health and nutrition makes or is making any difference. This, of course, depends. Alone, each of us is indeed helpless to change very much. Standing alone is a false ideal. We<sup>1</sup> have thus plenty to learn from the lessons of mutuality or even of militancy. Individual compassion does just not lead in the direction of supporting true grassroots organization, mobilization and solidarity. To use an old adage, 'divided one begs, united one bargains and demands'.

Grassroots-organized sporadic, collective acts are happening all the time (such as the ones we are witnessing in several countries right now). They are quite often the result of non-political and personal leadership initiatives. To make these really count and add up to processes leading to sustainable outcomes, they need to be progressively channeled into new patterns of higher political meaning and impact. Activists are needed to lead the way in rolling out such a transition. This, because without continuity and follow-through actions, popular struggles risk remaining little more than a heap of toothless words.

In our public health nutrition context, two questions arise: Are the fields of health and nutrition legitimate and good ports of entry for such activism, and if the answer is yes, are we ready for such a challenge?

Again, if the answer is yes, new forms of progressive action and education are needed in our line of development work and, to act effectively, we need to first develop a widely shared strategy pointing in this direction. In such a strategy, we cannot merely denounce; we must also announce a new order, an order with more empowering health and nutrition alternative, people-centered actions. We must

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<sup>1</sup> In aspirational writing, progressives often address their writing to "we." This refers to the writer, the readers, and other like-minded progressives.

strive to become proactive, not merely reactive. Today, the inescapable challenge is, together with claim holders (see Box 1), to redefine the global strategies to combat ill-health and malnutrition that are ultimately rooted in their social

### **Box 1**

The essence of the Human Rights-based approach is that it tells us that, in addition to doing a **Causal Analysis**, we need to carry out what is called a **Capacity Analysis** (or accountability analysis).

What is a Capacity Analysis?

To analyze any Human Rights situation it is essential to identify two main groups of actors: Claim Holders and Duty Bearers.

Claim Holders are the individuals and groups whose universally recognized entitlements are or are not being catered for by the states they live in, and whose rights are thus either being abused or violated.

Duty Bearers are those individuals or institutions that are obliged to uphold the specific right related to each entitlement. If a right is abused or violated, accountability can be demanded.

The end result of a good causal/situation analysis is a list of locally specific immediate, underlying and basic causes that determine the problems being addressed. It is here--when potential solutions have been collectively identified--where Capacity Analysis comes in.

Capacity Analysis takes what is being proposed to be done for each determinant at each causal level (immediate, underlying and basic) and looks at what is already being done or not being done (and why) for that problem. It then looks at who should be doing something about it [individual and/or institution(s) who is (are) the corresponding duty bearer(s)] and attaches the name of that (those) person(s) or institution(s) to each proposed solution. This results in a list of the most crucial persons/institutions that have to be approached to push them to get the proposed solution(s) for each cause implemented so as to fulfill their human rights obligations. [Note that, often, a particular duty bearer cannot meet her/his obligations, because some of her/his own rights are being violated by a duty bearer higher up, e.g., a ministry decision maker.]

determinants. Only then will we be able to solve the present situation of poorly addressed preventable ill-health, malnutrition and deaths in the overall development praxis we find at the local level in different parts of the world.

As an *avant-garde*, we need to reflect not only on new institutional ways of supporting grassroots initiatives, but we need to become proactive in helping to organize them and then helping generate alternative forms of knowledge and more human rights-based practices of democracy and local government. In the process, we also need to help redefine the significance and the role of foreign aid and other forms of international development cooperation in the fields of health and nutrition to better adapt them to the felt needs and rights of local communities, as well as involving people fully in the process. If the latter cannot be done, it is high time we begin considering turning foreign aid down.

Still proactively, we first need to help create a shared critical awareness of the immorality (and policies disregarding human rights) of the prevailing economic and social system responsible for the preventable ill-health and malnutrition we are increasingly left to deal with. We need to motivate people, both in the North and in the South, to change the mechanisms that lead to these conditions of poverty and injustice, and this can only be achieved by creating growing dismay and vocal (constructive) anger at such injustice.

Action along these lines (preferably preemptive) should even be considered an inescapable outcome if health, nutrition and development education is to be effective. The activist/educator thus has a role in our midst.

If we are to be consistent in demanding effective popular participation --a basic human rights principle-- and if we are to foster an authentic people-centered development (in our case using health and nutrition as a port of entry) we will have to:

- move away from coercive, top-down practices involving any kind of forced acceptance and move into consensus-building practices involving legitimate claim holders' involvement and approval;
- do things departing from the way people see them in their own environment;
- revolutionize people's expectations, helping them to move away from fatalistic outlooks;

- help define the elements of a new type of collective action to replace the existing situation that rests on individual, more isolated initiatives;
- help bring to fruition and enforce all UN-sanctioned people's rights;
- increase the negotiation and bargaining capacity--or at least the defense capacity-- of claim holders as they seek accountability;
- aim at changing constraining local, formal and informal political structures as needed;
- concentrate on changing the local generational dynamics when required, especially on changing the role of women (our main contact in health and nutrition work) in overall development as well as combatting patriarchy;
- work with people towards the goal of ultimately controlling their own resources (physical, human, organizational), fighting for resources they need from outside, and taking initiatives to shape their own future through strengthened, militant organizations;
- make sure claim holders get access to relevant information, especially the type of information that will help them hold their (duty bearer) government officials accountable. (Information given to people for use through the fashionable 'social marketing' approach is definitely not the type of information conducive to any meaningful participation or social change; social marketing simply does not bring about the needed sustainable structural changes --at best, it allows people to cope with an unjust situation).
- help redefine the roles and methods of 'participation,' in our case in health and nutrition;
- constantly re-gather groups being marginalized trying to make sure their special interests can be accommodated in the general desired human rights-based strategy;
- secure concrete short and long-term results for claim holders (with an initial emphasis on the former to foster self-confidence);
- monitor and evaluate said results, especially with regards to the degree of popular participation being achieved, as well as probing the equity of the benefits accrued;

- promote the self-education of our professional peers and of claim holders with the aim of achieving longer lasting human rights results.

Only the constant practice of such people-centered development activities through trial- and-error will overcome the limits of existing flawed development models and theories.

In short, starting with/from health and nutrition and through trial-and-error, we should all contribute, to the best of our abilities, to generate popular alternative human rights-based development strategies and the corresponding set of tactics to implement them. But to make a difference, remember that standing alone changes little; so network with other like-minded activists in this field!

*The real dividing line is not between those who share a particular identity and those who do not, but between those who fight for the rights of others and those who oppose those rights. (Susan Rosenthal)*