



# Community Health Approaches in Environmental and Occupational Health

## – *the CHESS experience*

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Community Health Cell, along with a few other organizations, co-initiated a process of sharing and learning skills on performing simple epidemiological surveys for groups campaigning for environmental justice in India. This was in response to a specific need articulated by environmental groups fighting industrial pollution, hazards of mining, use of pesticides in agriculture and occupational hazards, towards understanding the health impact of pollution and toxins as well as gaining skills that will help communities to study the local health problems in a more systematic and scientific way. This is how the Community Health-Environment Survey Skillshare (CHESS) process started in 2001. Till date, there have been four CHESS workshops, two being on environmental issues, two (2004 and 2008) focussing on mining, occupational health and safety respectively.

### What is CHESS?

Community members, environmental activists, scientists, and campaign organizations who are actively involved in the struggle against damage on land, water and livelihoods by industrial pollution (Kerala (Eloor), and Gujarat); toxins like pesticides (Endosulfan in Kasaragod, Kerala), mercury (ex-workers of a mercury thermometer factory in Kodaikanal) and mining (Andhra Pradesh, Orissa and Bihar) felt the urgent need to identify and document the health impact of environmental toxins and the pathways of environment exposure. **The main aim of the CHESS workshop was to build skills among various community groups in conducting community health surveys through tools that are relevant and usable by the people and to effectively use this information for their ongoing campaigns.**



*CHESS 2008 – Prioritising worker's health – A strategy and resource-sharing workshop*

### CHESS process aims at

- Creating a multi-disciplinary resource base of medical practitioners, community activists and toxicologists capable of conducting community health surveys in communities subject to industrial and environmental pollution
- Promoting interaction between community activists and community health experts to facilitate a discussion aimed at understanding the strengths and limitations of community health surveys
- Understanding the role of community health surveys in campaigns against pollution.

### CHESS workshops

Three workshops were held between 2001 and 2004 and one in 2008 specifically on worker's health. In each workshop, participants shared their experiences in their ongoing struggle against pollution, the perceived health impact on the people and their campaign efforts. The various aspects of community health surveys – design and implementation, resources and resource-sharing



opportunities, case-studies from various groups on how they used health surveys for campaigning — were shared. The sharing of different groups highlighted the **challenges in any kind of community health action** – vested interests of the company and the government; dichotomy between workers and other people living in the same community; lack of infrastructure and resources for health care and lack of a comprehensive understanding of the widespread and long-term impact of pollution.

The workshop also went beyond its narrower objective of capacity-building, with the coming-together of a larger network of people's groups, environmental activists, occupational health doctors or activists, lawyers, workers, union members, consumer groups, farmers and researchers. The coming-together created tremendous solidarity and positive energy with the sharing of stories, songs, movies and the networking of people's resources.

A lot of meaningful activity took place as a spin-off of the CHESS workshops- *Community health surveys* in industrially-polluted areas of Patancheru in Medak district of Andhra Pradesh, and Eloor in Ernakulam district of Kerala; *Fact-finding mission* of farmer deaths in Warangal district and health hazards of endosulfan spraying in Kasaragod, Kerala and *Health surveys* — development assessment of children in Punjab exposed to pesticides and neurological assessment of ex-workers exposed to mercury in Kodaikanal. In all these, CHC team members played a crucial role in supporting the groups, in refining the methodology of the study as well as reviewing the results of the study and highlighting the community health dimensions in each setting. In Kasaragod, a CHC team member helped in developing a short documentary, 'Sprays of misery in Kasaragod', on the health impact of aerial spraying of the pesticide endosulfan.

### The Mercury Story

In Kodaikanal, Dr. Mohan Isaac, a SOCHARA member, led a preliminary situation-analysis of the health issues of the ex-workers of the erstwhile Hindustan Lever thermometer factory. His observations supported the people's campaign for a rigorous scientific study. Interestingly, doctors of Hindustan Lever presented the findings of the company-initiated study to the CHC team and other environmental and occupational health experts associated with CHC. The CHC team and associates found serious gaps in the study and called for 'more transparency and accountability' in divulging the full details of the study.

They also stressed the need to 'look into evidence in an interactive, participatory and holistic way' focusing on the health of workers.

To this date, CHC team members have been supporting the court case of the workers against the Hindustan Lever Ltd (HLL) Company seeking justice and equitable compensation. The HLL worker's struggle as well as the other struggles highlighted in this article have brought about the various dimensions of the importance of the CHESS process:

- Ensuring that the "Polluter Pays"
- Mobilizing the community on the understanding of linkages of environment and health of communities.
- Preventing Future Harm – armed with the knowledge of pollution and wider health effects, communities can play a more active and informed role in deciding the course of their communities' development.
- Countering Government or the Industry – the major impediment is the baseless assertions of the industry and the government that a community's problems have nothing to do with the pollution they are subject to. Health surveys by the communities can help them to demand with governments or industries to establish beyond doubt that the polluting activities of industries or toxins are not related to the community's health problems and will not cause health problems among people.
- Health Care Needs — even after the BHOPAL gas disaster tragedy, the public health system in India is not geared to address the health care needs due to effects of recent or long-standing pollution and definitely not at all equipped to handle any emergency situation like an accident or gas leak.

### Future role of CHESS

The CHESS process endeavours to highlight the impacts of pollution / toxins on the health of a community by building capacity among diverse groups in addressing environmental and worker's health issue. Community groups and activists learn skills of performing health surveys and professionals (medical, public health, toxicology) learn about health effects of toxins and other pollutants, adopt and develop indicators that are easy and simple to use. One of the activists describes the synergy, "*CHESS brought together two very important groups of people – those who know how to organize and fight, and those who can offer new tools and weapons (health surveys) for strengthening the fight*". ■

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