Community Monitoring for Health for All

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Community-monitoring is one of the main pillars of the National Rural Health Mission (NRHM). Community-monitoring is a basic right of every community. As the public health care system, including both the salaries and the infrastructure, is paid for by tax payer's money, it is every citizen's right to be aware of how that money has been used. Apart from this, monitoring is the first step in raising awareness and collecting information that can be used in planning for health.

While we are very careful when we buy a bar of washing soap or a packet of salt or sugar, and we check the packet and the expiry date and return the packet even if there is a slight hint of damage, we seem to care very little about the type of health care that is provided to us in both the public and the private health care systems. This is partly because of the mystification of health and the feeling that as common persons we cannot question the practice of persons who have spent many years in studying the subject. However, it has been well established that unless health systems are accountable to the communities they serve, they cannot contribute to Health for All.

Some basic requirements for community-monitoring include the following:

* *Awareness among people:* Even though medical care is a complicated issue, it is possible for lay persons to understand enough to be able to engage with and demand accountability from the health care system. Towards this end, guarantees by the government and standards set are useful guides to what is to be expected (and that can thus be demanded) from the system. Therefore, people must be aware of the guarantees and standards themselves. Unless people know what is supposed to be offered at health centres at a particular level, they cannot monitor. Thus there is a lot of preparation required for communities before the monitoring and planning process.

* *Structure / organization:* It is obvious that monitoring has to be done by a group of people. Single individuals will find it very difficult to confront authority and question it. However, while it is true that a group of people is needed to monitor anything, the group has to be both representative and acceptable to the community in order to work for Health for All.

* *Redressal mechanism:* It is important to evolve proper redressal mechanisms to respond to the issues brought up by the monitoring groups. Unless there is a prompt response by the system, the monitoring group will get frustrated and disheartened. Of course, these redressal mechanisms need to be jointly evolved by both the people and the public health system.

* *Sensitization of the public health staff:* It is also important to sensitize the staff in the public health system about the issue of monitoring and that it is every community's right to monitor the health system. It is important to emphasize that monitoring should not be converted into individual blaming; it should attempt at *raising and understanding the underlying systemic issues*. The idea is not to confront staff but to improve the system together (the staff and the community).

Steps in the Community Monitoring process:

* *Awareness-building:* The first step is to get people enthusiastic about the whole process. To do this, it has to be something which people find important. There needs to be a concerted attempt at raising the awareness of the people both in terms of their rights as well as the guarantees to them. Ideally, this information should be made aware to them by the government itself. However, more practically, it is up to interested NGOs and CBOs to conduct

awareness programmes. Alternatively, interested citizens / community groups can collect information regarding their rights and the guarantees and standards from government websites *www.mohfw.nic.in/NRHM/iphs.htm* or through the Right to Information Act *(www.rti.gov.in)*. Even simple information like the days the ANM is supposed to come to the village is very empowering and can galvanize people into action.

✱ *Formation of committee:* The committee must be representative of all the groups in the community and the process of its constitution should be transparent and acceptable to all. It is better to conduct awareness-building activities first before beginning the process of committee formation. Apart from the committee at the village level, it is important to form supportive committees at higher levels of administration like PHC, Block, District and State. These committees can gather information from committees below them and work with the government officials at their levels. While some problems can be sorted out at the village level itself, many issues need to be sorted out at higher levels and thus the presence of committees at various levels is very useful. The committees at higher levels can also play an important supportive role in training and capacity-building in committees at lower levels.

✱ *Developing a monitoring checklist:* It is important to create / evolve checklists that the monitoring committees can use while monitoring a particular service or institution. These checklists must be easily understandable, relevant and easily collectable at that level. Also the more tasks the committee is able to complete successfully as a group the more confident it gets. Thus, in the early stages, it is important to get the committee to perform simple and doable tasks to boost their confidence.

✱ *Monitoring:* Monitoring should be done at regular intervals and the results of each round of monitoring should be discussed at the level of the village itself. Only if the results are discussed at the village level it self can the people identify gaps, recognize trends (both positive and negative) and get information to discuss priorities. It is important that monitoring does not become a purely confrontational process. It should be seen as trying to uncover the systemic issues rather than blaming individual functionaries.

Other important issues:

● The role of the Panchayat: It is important to understand that however enthusiastic the NGO or

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Key learnings from Community Monitoring

● There is tremendous enthusiasm among people to monitor and plan. They are very keen to get their rights. It is a great step towards the building of a people's movement for health.

● It is important to develop a strong district team to support the various stages of the programme and help in monitoring and analysis of data.

● It is important to plan in such a way that there are multiple engagements with the people – just one or two workshops are not enough for these concepts to sink in.

● Communities really like to understand the logic behind specific interventions. Explaining to them the logic of interventions / practices empowers them and they become more confident in questioning even doctors.

CBO that is facilitating the project is, it is finally only structures like the Panchayat Raj institutions that can truly sustain such processes. It is thus important to get both the individuals as well as the institution involved.

● From monitoring to planning: Monitoring should not be seen as an end in itself. It is merely a means (albeit an important one) of gathering enough awareness and information so that communities can perform simple health planning exercises. This is a crucial aspect of community participation and crucial for the achievement of Health for All.

CHC has been facilitating the implementation of the Pilot phase of community monitoring project in Tamil Nadu and in Karnataka. CHC has been supporting all the activities mentioned in the monitoring process.

In Summary

✱ In this project, there is the formation of committees at various levels and training for these committees.

✱ There is an extensive checklist / questionnaire that the village health and sanitation committee members need to fill in once in three months.

✱ The information collected should be analysed at the village level itself.

✱ The information is then put together as a report card with colour-coded assessments – with *red* indicating poor performance, *orange* indicating fair performance and *green* indicating good performance.

At the end of the Pilot phase of the Community-Monitoring, the government is supposed to expand this to the whole state based on the recommendations emerging from the pilot phase. ∎

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