

2 Understanding and Mobilizing for Community Health

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Understanding and Mobilizing for Community Health



When Gloria and other health promoters realized many people in Manglaralto and the surrounding region were getting sick, they quickly knew the problem was cholera, a community health problem with an environmental cause: contaminated water. The health promoters and village health educators went from house to house to educate everyone about the problem and what to do. Once the success of the basic treatments had earned people's trust, the community began to work on the root causes of the cholera and other health problems.

Working on the root causes through community participation and education, the community was able to begin making many environmental health improvements. With each improvement, the villagers gained greater confidence in their ability to change their own lives.

It is necessary to ask many questions and collect information in various ways to find the cause of a health problem. Often there are strong conflicts in a community that require long processes of discussion and struggle to resolve. While each community will find its own way toward making changes and use different activities as it organizes, the experiences of *Salud para el Pueblo* give some examples of how communities can learn about the root causes of environmental health problems and work to change them.

Mobilizing for Environmental Health

After many years of poverty and isolation, the people living on those muddy hills on the coast of Ecuador were discouraged. They did not know how to improve their lives. Everyday life was so hard, it was difficult to believe in or plan for a better future.

By working to solve the immediate health problem — cholera — Gloria and the health workers of Salud para el Pueblo saved many lives. The success of the health promoters, local organizations, and the villagers in working together to stop the epidemic motivated and prepared them to overcome other problems as well. When the big storm destroyed much of their work, they were able to organize and recover from the storm's damage. Then they were able to move on to solve other problems. Their work to make communities healthier continues, as they improve present-day conditions and build for the future.

Work to understand root causes

Health problems may be caused by many things:

germs, toxic chemicals, accidents, hunger, exposure to extreme cold or heat, and so on. These are examples of immediate causes of illness. Illnesses have many immediate causes, but they also have root causes.

Identifying root causes can help us to identify what we may need to do to solve the problem in the long term. You can see how using the “But why...?” activity, as Gloria did (see page 7), can help people understand how a single problem may have several different root causes.



Change takes time

Improving environmental health does not happen quickly. In Manglaralto, the health workers first treated cholera by giving rehydration drink and also worked to prevent it by making the water clean. Then they organized the community to build new water systems and pit toilets to prevent cholera in the future. But it was only after the big storm came and washed away all of these improvements that they understood the problems of **erosion** and flooding caused by **deforestation** (the loss of trees). They needed this understanding of root causes to be able to make lasting changes.

Sometimes, we must struggle and fail several times before we succeed. Often, it is only by seeing what does not work that we learn what does — and why. Improving environmental health takes time because it often requires 4 different kinds of changes:

- changes to improve water systems, housing, or other things we build for ourselves (**infrastructure**).
- changes in what we buy, such as refusing to buy junk food, toxic cleaning products, or products wrapped in plastic (**consumption**).
- changes in our habits, such as regular hand washing, separating trash so more can be recycled, or growing crops in new ways (**behavior**).
- changes in how much power local people, corporations, central governments, and others have in making decisions that affect the environment (**political**).

All of these changes take time and affect each other.



We must be the
change we wish to
see in the world.



Work with young people

One way to make sure change lasts is to work with young people, because they will take what they learn into the future. Each of us, no matter what age we are, can adopt the attitude of a young person — to always be willing to learn and try new things.

*Improvements in
environmental
health happen
step by step.
Have patience.
Sometimes change
that happens
quickly wears away
just as quickly.*



Activities for Learning and Mobilizing

Group activities can help people understand root causes of health problems and make plans for change. Which activities you use will depend on what you need to know, what you hope to do, and what resources are available. Activities can:

- Bring people together to identify common problems.
- Find out what people feel they need most.
- Gather information about what is causing a health problem.
- Analyze problems to discover their immediate causes and their root causes.
- Gather all points of view in the community. A project will not be successful if some groups or opinions are left out. People will not want to help if their opinions are ignored!

Environmental health is always a community issue, and requires people working together to make improvements. Whether the goal is to reduce the risk of an epidemic, to plant a community garden, to improve the health and safety of people living near a factory or working in a mine, or to address some other environmental health issue, the more people have a shared understanding of the problem and a shared commitment to solving it, the more successful they will be.

Women need a voice

In some communities, women and girls are more likely to participate in organized activities if they are in a group separate from men. The women's group then presents their ideas to the larger group. This way, women and girls have a chance to speak in a strong united voice before the whole community. By strengthening the voice of women and girls, and building their leadership skills, the whole community is made stronger.



If you want to solve a problem, work with the people affected by the problem.

Guided discussion

To have a shared understanding of health problems, people need to talk to each other. A guided discussion is a way for a group of people to talk to each other and to ask and answer specific questions. The “But why...?” activity (see pages 7, 12, 38, 48, and 422) is one kind of guided discussion. Drawings for Discussion (see pages 59 and 260) and Body mapping (see page 266) are also kinds of guided discussions.

The person who guides the discussion is sometimes called a facilitator or animator. Most of the activities in this book require a facilitator to make sure each person participates to the best of his or her ability, and to help make sure the discussion or activity leads to action.

Community mapping

Community mapping is an activity in which people make a map together based on what they see and know about their community. By making a community health map, you can learn:

- **where** health problems are.
- **who** these problems affect.
- **how** these health problems may happen because of conditions in the environment.

Making a map can help people see patterns in health problems, begin to identify root causes of these problems, and see how conditions in the community have changed over time. A map can also help people identify important community resources and strengths they may not have been aware of. And mapping can be used as a step in protecting important traditional or sacred places. (For examples of mapping, see pages 68, 164, and 444.)



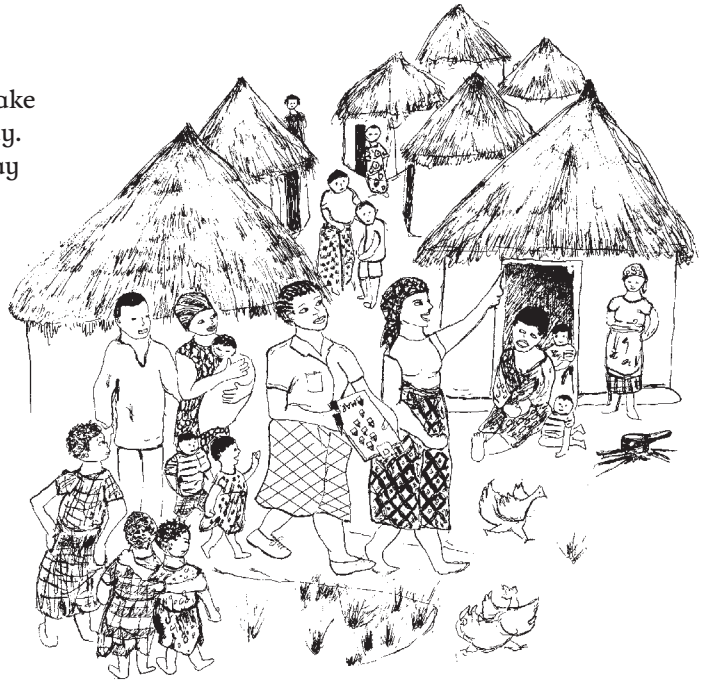
Make maps with pens or paint on paper, or on the ground with rocks, sticks, and anything else available.

Finding out what a community needs

People often have different opinions about what the problems are in their community and how best to fix them. Making everyone aware of the range of problems that exists and the various causes of the problems, and helping people decide which ones to work on in the short and long term is sometimes called a “needs assessment.” (For more examples of needs assessment activities, see pages 72, 110, and 221.) A good needs assessment process can help make sure everyone’s needs and abilities are considered in planning.

Health walks

During a health walk, people take a closer look at their community. They try to find things that may be causing health problems, such as an unsafe water source, a polluting business, or a lack of firewood. When a health walk is done as a group, people share with each other the different things they know about problems. Then they can work together on possible solutions. The more people involved, the better. (For examples of health walks, see pages 391 and 443.)



Change over time

Another way to understand problems and needs in a community is to compare conditions now to how it was in the past. Then think about how you would like it to be in the future. One way to do this is to gather stories from elders in your community.

Encouraging young people in the community to lead these activities helps build respect and understanding between the generations. It also helps preserve those community traditions that everyone wants to keep.

A community timeline can help people understand how changes have occurred from generation to generation, and take into account significant events such as a road being paved, a factory opening, a dam being built, and so on. Mapping environmental changes is another way to share knowledge of community history through pictures or maps of changes over time in fields, farms, forests, settlements, rivers and lakes. (For an example, see page 164.)

Drawing activities

Making and looking at drawings can help us see solutions to problems that we might not see otherwise. Drawings can be used to start guided discussions, and drawing can be a way for people who cannot read or write well to express themselves and to participate in group leadership. (For examples of drawing activities, see pages 50, 54, and 275.)

Some communities work together to paint pictures on the walls of buildings (murals) that express their problems and hopes for a better, healthier future. (For ideas on making and using drawings in community education, see Hesperian's book, *Helping Health Workers Learn*.)



Community surveys

Community surveys are an organized way to gather information. They can be used to find out what health issues people have, to consider similarities and differences in what people think or believe, or to measure the support for different plans or actions in the community.

In a survey, the same questions are asked in the same way to all of the people participating. Surveys can be done in homes, workplaces, schools, places of worship, other gathering places, or even over the telephone or by post.



Surveys allow people to share their thoughts privately, without having to come to meetings or other public events. They can be a way for people who might be afraid, or who are not allowed to participate in the community decision making process, to have their concerns and ideas considered. Often people are more willing to talk when women give the surveys. (For an example of a community health survey, see pages 500 to 505, "Communities affected by oil organize a health study.")

Theater

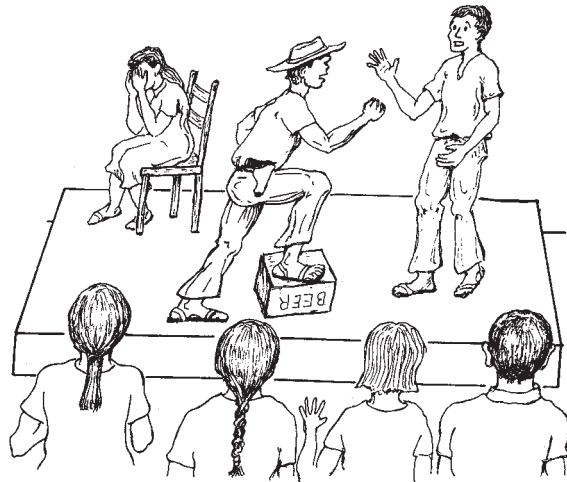
Theater is a way to explore problems and propose solutions while entertaining and having fun. People can act out their own experiences and imagine the experiences of others. Some issues and conflicts may be easier to consider if they are portrayed in another time and place. (See the next page for ways to use theater.)

Sociodrama

A sociodrama allows people to act out a problem and demonstrate some of its causes and effects. An example of how sociodrama is used to talk about a forest resource conflict is on pages 186 to 188.

Sociodramas can bring up lots of emotions. Some community organizers like to end by having people sing a song together or do some other 'cooperation' activity.

Interactive theater is a kind of sociodrama in which everyone both watches and participates. Any person in the audience can tell the actors to stop, and then can take the place of an actor and act out a different solution to the problem. This is especially helpful in situations where people take turns playing the role of the person who has little or no power.

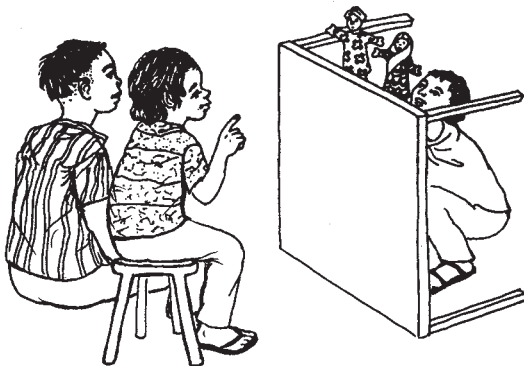


Any story can be turned into a sociodrama as long as it has characters and a problem to be worked out.

Role play

A role play does not require as much preparation as a sociodrama, and can help explain different points of view or resolve conflicts. People act out different roles in real-life situations to show what they would do. You can discuss and repeat a role play to understand why people behave a certain way.

Changing the way people in power act is easy on the stage, but very difficult in real life. Using a drama to practice how we interact with people who have power over us helps people prepare different ways to respond to power in real life.



Puppet show

A puppet show uses puppets instead of people to act out the story of a community conflict. They make people laugh, and can help them see things in ways they are not used to. Some people find it easier to talk through puppets than to act on a stage.

A Guide to Which Activity to Use When

The activities in this book are good for exploring the particular environmental health issues of the chapters in which they are described. And they can also help you move forward while organizing in your community. They can:

- help identify problems or start a conversation about a particular subject (see pages 59, 69, 72, 260, and 468).
- help a group make decisions or choose between different needs and options (see pages 138 and 191).



- help to gather information, share knowledge, and change the way we look at our environment and ourselves (see pages 50, 54, 90, 391, and 443).
- help to learn new ideas, to relearn ideas we already knew or to learn old ideas in a new way (see pages 158, 284, 289, 336, and 514).
- help to begin organizing to solve a particular problem (see pages 110, 164, 221, and 275).
- help to teach difficult ideas or understand and resolve conflicts (see pages 110 and 186).



Some activities can be used together, such as making community maps during or after a health walk, or using a role play as part of a needs assessment activity. What is most important is that activities help people to gather information, share knowledge, and deepen understanding. This will support their organizing, empowerment, and work to solve the root causes of community health problems.

