Community Health Learning Programme 2008

Source: Community Health Cell

A Report on the Community Health Learning Experience

Sabyasachi Das

COMMUNITY HEALTH CELL

Community Health Learning Programme

June 2008 to February 2009

REPORT

Sabyasachi Das

Intern, Community Health Cell

My first five weeks in CHC :

When I first came to CHC I was bit nervous because of I thought I will be completely out of place. But soon my nervousness vanished when I met CHC team and the other fellows who were from diverse background and completely open to any kind of thoughts. There were all kinds of discussions, starting from human rights to solar energy. For the first time I could speak anything and share any idea without giving any second thought and classes were so interesting that for the first time afternoon tea became an optional. For the first time in my life I got the taste of freedom. The concept of non hierarchy was a new thing for me. In fact it took a great effort for me to call Ravi and Thelma by there names. But I soon realized that respect has nothing to do with "sir" or "madam". Every day CHC team amazed me with their absolute brilliance and charm. Before joining CHC I thought I had to make a choice between technologies and social work. But CHC showed me the way how I can use my background knowledge in technology to do good to the humanity and I felt a great sense of responsibility.

The orientation composed of lectures on philosophies of collective consciousness by Dr. Shirdi to entrepreneurial motivation by Dr. Sunil Kaul. But Dr. Ravi was always the man of the match for his "monsoon game" and "mallur story". My best learning experience were during our field visits to Hannur and Raichur. Our trips were very well organized and very thoughtfully planned keeping in mind all of our interests. My best learning experience was in Potnal, there was something devine about that place. In my personal opinion it was the best example of organizational management. Each and everything was so right in place. I was amazed by looking at kids studying late at night without any compulsion. I would really like to thank Edi for making me believe in community approach.

I feel there so much to learn from everything and yet so little time. Each concept for development has there own importance and it's very easy for one to get carried away and get lost. And sometimes it's very difficult for me to focus at one thing to get a better understanding. Prioritizing my learning objectives is the most difficult thing for me at present but I think that at some point of time I will be clearer about my objectives and what I want to do with rest of my life.

Surfing through the Chaos

My quest for understanding poverty started with 'Raku's story' which is a typical story of poor in India and elsewhere. I was disturbed with conflicting thoughts. I was trying to identify different reasons what might be the main cause for the death of the child. There are certainly not a single reason and things are more complex than it seems to be. So there is no point to be conclusive or judgmental rather it's important to consider different aspects of it. But few things were absolutely certain. Poverty was the first thing that came to my mind as the primary cause. My understanding of poverty after staying 18 years in one of the poorest and underdeveloped part in India was that poverty can be broadly described by two ways, either by lack of money or lack of access to different resources. These are the simplest concept which makes a poor so different from a rich.

Lack of money also means the distribution of money. Most of the poor people are daily wage earners which makes the situation very vulnerable at the time of distress. Therefore to have a secured mode distribution such as monthly income mode where people can plan there investment with provisions for leave at times of emergency is very crucial. And that's were comes the need for different livelihood generation modes and the concept of micro-entrepreneurship. The trip to Potnal and meeting the JMS group was a good start for me to look into this concept in more details. The second reason of poverty is access to resources. People can access resources either by earning means to afford it at its present cost or if the resource becomes affordable to the existing purchasing capacity. That's where appropriate technology has a big role to play.

So far India has seen exponential growth in terms of economical, scientific and technological development. India has been successful in bringing many people out of the poverty line and to give them a better living standard. There has been a significant decrease in infant mortality rate and increase in life expectancy. It has tackled many life threatening diseases, and eradicated pandemics like small pox. These all happened because of community participation and India's own talent pool. We have a great potential to excel and aiming for many new achievements.

But as India is moving towards its transformation and new changes, at the same time it's rapidly loosing out many of its traditional values and culture. The tradition and the knowledge pool which took more than 5,000 years to evolve and establish. Some how the modern developments and technologies have failed to appreciate that. It has also failed to address people from the lower quartile and the marginalized which led to a huge gap between the rich and the poor. And in this process the most essential thing that is health of people has been ignored.

Concept of Appropriate Technology

Most of the existing technologies are market driven and their existence is dependant on creating a new need rather than addressing the existing one. Government policies are more focused on economic development rather than addressing issues such as healthcare and rural livelihood. Therefore it is necessary to prioritize our limited resources according to both the problems and the possible solutions. There is an urgent need to revitalize our traditional knowledge and for technological development which can reach to everyone, and for this we have to define development in terms of appropriateness, acceptability and affordability.

An appropriate technology can have many definitions but appropriateness in terms of India's present scenario would be a model where the technology is either developed or can be maintained through a process of community involvement and participation. Since the previous models of rural development failed because it could not address the heterogeneity in rural India. Any technological development most of the time has catered to the influential people in a community who have the means to access those resources. Since innovation and a particular skill can come from anyone irrespective of their financial status, nurturing those set of skills could make a sustainable model catering to everyone. Since the concept of donor and receiver does not work, therefore this concept of involvement is very crucial for the sustainability and continuous improvement of the technology according to people's need. It can be either a modification of an existing technology or a new technology by itself. Since these technologies are based on people's need with a special focus on the poor and the marginalized, this has to be also socially and culturally acceptable, accessible and affordable to everyone. Therefore, any appropriate technology before its implementation should go through a process of assessment taking care of the following parameters:

- It should focus on meeting the basic needs of a community such as safe drinking water, nutrition, proper sanitation, energy, education and other things directly or indirectly related to health and then prioritize contextually.

- It should be easy to use and can be maintained by the local people and scope for further innovation and improvement by the people.
- It should be socially and culturally acceptable to a particular community that will use it. Modification in existing technology can also be done for making it acceptable.

- It should be accessible to everyone irrespective of class, caste, gender and geographical locations. For example practicing traditional medicine for primary healthcare practiced by local practitioner can reach everyone.

- It should be affordable or cost effective in long run. Technologies such as bio-fertilizers and organic farming might be expensive than a chemical fertilizer but in

long run it retains the soil's nutrients and also a good approach for disposing organic wastes.

- It should be environment friendly and should not damage the ecology and biodiversity of the local and the surrounding places.

- It should empower people from all sectors and community. Local tribes and dalits practicing herbal medicines and treating the upper classes is a good example of reducing caste and class differences in a community.

- It should be feasible in terms of geographical location, economic status and simplicity to develop and use it. It should also have a good local demand for better sustenance of the technology.

- Apart from the benefits of the technology itself, it should also provide a livelihood for the local people with a special focus on the marginalized and women. Women self help groups apart from financial independency, adds more confidence and makes them aware of their rights and can give them a common platform to interact and share their problems and to come up with solutions.

- An appropriate technology should also make an attempt to restore the local ecology, livestock, traditional knowledge and culture. At the same time to harness the progression in modern science and technologies with a learnt approach.

These concepts of appropriate technology by itself cannot be successful unless and until they are nurtured in politically and socially conducive environment. The greatest challenge lies in the execution and implementation of these models. Proper awareness, education and community participation is absolutely essential in implementation of these ideas. But this would certainly help government, organizations and institutes to prioritize their limited resources according to the appropriateness of solutions to varieties of problems. For these people working in different spheres has to come together to work under a same roof to make it a movement for betterment in all dimensions.

Appropriate Technology and Livelihood case studies

Smokeless Stove

Aragyam Energy Pvt Ltd which is an initiative of Covenant Center for Development (CCD), Madurai which is partly funded by CCD and British Petroleum. This technology has been transferred by IISc-Center for Sustainable Technology Dept. There are two version of this product. One is a big size Stove used for Anganbari and primary schools for midday meals and also for community purposes such as for women SHGs. The other version is a miniaturization of the same thing with slight technological modification. This needs a compressed wood cubes as fuels. Thus reducing the need for kerosene oil and also giving profit to wood fuel making micro-enterprises which is most managed by SHGs.
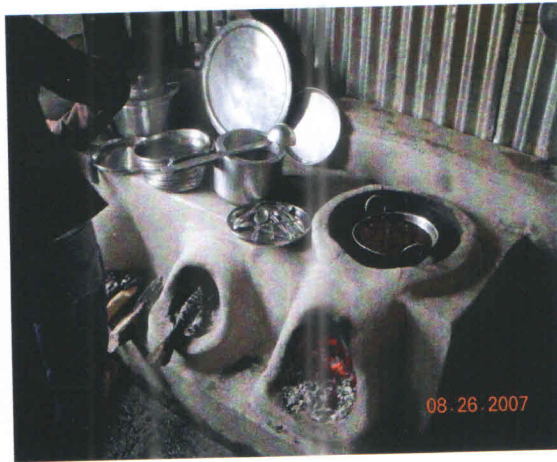
This technology is very safe for rural household use as it avoids harmful release of smoke inside a closed chamber. Women are more vulnerable to different kinds of lung diseases. Most of the fire accidents have been also reported because of the conventional wood burning and kerosene stoves. Though it is slightly expensive than the kerosene stoves but in long run it's cost effective because of the saving in fuel. Kerosene which is provided by government is often costlier than the labeled price and also the supply is not very regular through PDS. It has also been seen sometimes that for making a ration card one has to bribe the authority which further reduces assess to kerosene to the marginalized people.

Herbal Medicines:

Organizations such as CCD (Covenant Center for Development) and FRLHT (Foundation for Revitalization of Local Health Traditions) have taken a good initiative not only to restore local health traditions but also to evolve radically by using modern science and technology as a tool. It comprises of modern labs and data management systems which is partially shared because of different reasons.

These traditions are not only time tested but also well suited for particular geographical situations, and easily available for local use. Herbal medicines can be used either as a ready-made product or as a home made formulation. Readymade products are either made by local healers or by different companies like GMCL, Arogya Nilayam, and IMCOPS etc. These are easy to use and often more efficient since correct formulation is maintained. The other form is home made such as different "kashayas" and "curnas" for primary healthcare. FRLHT is also involved in landscaping for medicinal plants for primary healthcare in each household for an easy assess.

Gram Mooligai Company Ltd. (GMCL) consists of women self help groups who are the stake-holder of the company. Because of this reason they have a sense of ownership and does there work properly to reap the profits. These groups are divided according to different jobs such as growing of the plant, procurement of the raw product, manufacturing of the final product. They are paid after every 15 days with a provision for leave twice in that period. This kind of secured payment system helps the labors to plan there investment and could also do there savings better. Each of these members has an account in SBI bank.

Mud Bricks

This technology was initially developed by IISc-Center for Sustainable Technology Dept. This technology is catching up fast in many organizations because of it being environment friendly. This is made by a mixture of locally available clay and cement and then pressing it to give it a final shape. This is considered to give a better strength because of its better bondage with cement. These bricks do not need to be baked unlike the conventional brick which takes more than 50 years to degrade once it's baked. They also avoid the release of fly ashes and harmful smoke which is produced by conventional brick kline.

Since these bricks are made by local clay, and other local resources it doesn't require any transportation, thus creating employment for local labors. The left out unearthed spot can also be used for rain water harvesting. This kind of technology can be very useful for uncultivated land. But the major limitation of this technology is that it could be done only places where there is enough of water for curing for 20 days which is a important part of brick making.

Baby Warmer

This baby warmer was an outcome of compulsion and an urgent need for neonatal care. The warmer is a brain child of Dr. Sathya of Chengalpettai Hospital. In spite of being a district hospital few years back it was seriously unequipped, lacking even simple things like a baby warmer due to which there was high infant mortality rate in that area.

This is a simple design made by a local carpenter and an electrician. This has undergone a series of modification from using a 100W bulb to a temperature sensitive heating system. This is one tenth of the cost of the existing machine in the market. This is product is also getting popular in near by places and also in other developing countries like Indonesia.

Conventional baby warmer

Dr. Sathya's Baby warmer

The main advantage with this product is that it can be easily maintained unlike the conventional baby warmer. This kind of things can also be a livelihood model for rural artisans and carpenters. These incubators can also be very useful even in PHCs and Taluk lavel hospitals. Further modifications such as using solar as the energy source is also on process which will make it functional in even in villages where there is no supply of electricity. After the installation of this incubator, infant mortality rate in Chengalpet and near by villages has significantly gone down which demonstrates the importance of these kinds of appropriate technologies.

Spirulina Culture

This is an algae which can be easily grown in water tanks and can be managed by local people. Spirulina can be used as an excellent nutritional supplement. Spirulina given as a supplement by OfERR has been very successful in reducing protein deficiency and meeting overall nutrition requirement of Tsunami affected people and Srilankan refugees. Spirulina can also be included in mid-day meals programs in village schools._Apart from its nutritional values it can also contribute to rural economy and as a livelihood model.

Local communities can grow Spirulina for nutrition supplementation and can sell the extra of it to raise funds for community developments. Since this doesn't require much of strenuous work, therefore it is best fitted for women SHGs which ultimately empower them socially and economically. Spirulina soup used as a nutrition supplement for malnutrited school children in Nadukuppam village and Srilankan refugees in Chennai has brought down the cases of malnutrition in these villages suggesting its effect on the health of a community.

Community Health Learning Programme is the second phase
of the Community Health Fellowship Scheme (2003-2007)
and is supported by
the Sir Ratan Tata Trust, Mumbai