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CHILDREN AS AGENTS OF CHANGE

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CHILDREN AS AGENTS OF CHANGE

It has taken some time for the world to realise that development is more than a pure economic process. Development is not an automatic process that is the result of the injection of capital and technology, but it is ultimately the changes that take place in man. It is an educational process that aims at changing the behaviour, the priorities and the choices by the people. In Africa, the water supply programmes of the sixties and the seventies are a clear case in point. It is by now estimated that over half the pumps and public taps were out of order within a few years after being installed. Water is not a controversial development item, and the terrible performance rate of the water supply programme is not so much due to financial or technical bottlenecks, but to a lack of community participation. Sanitation, which is a much more complicated development item, shows the same poor performance rate. On a global basis it is believed that over 40% of the latrines are not used. The facilities are there, but the communications necessary to cause a real change have not been successful in achieving real participation of the people.

Education is a central factor in the change in behaviour that controls development and community participation, but the education process needs to be aiming at motivations that persuade people that the new ways are to their advantage. Adults are equipped with a balanced pattern of beliefs and habits that guides them through life. The development process is changing and often disrupting this cultural pattern and that is a reason why development efforts often meet so much resistance. Only if a link can be made, that gives the people a clear motivation, change will be achieved. In some areas of development such changes are especially difficult to achieve, because the traditional rules are strong and rigid and when strong pressure is exerted the people will pretend to go along but in reality resist change. In Human Settlement Planning and in Health many such situations have thwarted the efforts of governments to promote a rapid development. The settlement of nomadic people, the introduction of sanitation and immunisation campaigns have all, time and again, encountered profound resistance in the first attempts to reach the whole target group.

In all cases it was found that radical changes in the beliefs and habits of people that these programmes brought along, needed much time and communications before being successful. The time perspective for national programmes is not years, but decades, in view of the numbers, distances and logistics involved. Consequently most of the people who are to be affected by these programmes are not yet adults and do not have to be shaken out of a rigid set of beliefs, if they can be reached now about some of the development options that they can choose later. Communications with children are increasingly recognized as a crucial element in development planning, because children have great development expectations and are open to new ways of doing things. When reached before they have fixed ideas about behaviour they will accept future changes without the emotional traumas that certain developments will cause adults.

It is in this context that a programme of child communications has been considered by UNCHS/Habitat and UNICEF concerning environmental health and human settlement development. The children of Africa are the future targets in the development programmes in this field and educational efforts promoting better human settlement and environmental conditions now will facilitate the implementation and acceptance of such development programmes in the future. As the subject of the first efforts of the two agencies the introduction of sanitation has been chosen. In this field the cultural factors are particularly strong and because sanitation is surrounded by many taboos and much secrecy. Communications in this field have in Africa more often failed than in any other area. Sanitation as such is not a very fashionable area and people either avoid the subject all together or shroud it in euphemisms that complicate practical activities. The common expressions of "going private", "washing hands", "going to the bathroom, restroom, comfort room" are part of the elaborate efforts we all engage in to avoid any reference to defecation and urination, the simple body functions we are really talking about. Even the professionals in this field: the sanitary engineers have developed a whole language that attempts to sanitise their very field of activity. Low cost sanitation is a relatively new approach that recognises the simple truth that sewerage systems, - by most people seen as the ultimate sign of civilisation, cannot possibly be made available to the low income groups in the developing countries. At the same time it was recognized that without sanitation, clean water will remain much of an illusion. While sanitation for a few privileged does not mean very much, basic sanitation for all the members of a community breaks the major link of contamination that in the developing countries takes at least ten years off everybody's life. The development workers in this field are all too familiar with these facts and for them sanitation facilities are long overdue services that needs no elaboration. The focus of the project workers becomes, therefore, a short one and as a result the construction aspects of the latrine programmes dominate their perspective. But the low rate of effective use of these facilities demonstrates that the construction programme is not the main question for the recipients. For them the question concerns a change in behaviour that is difficult to achieve and sometimes difficult to justify. Little of what the project workers tell them has any relation to their ways of seeing the world and unless an appeal is made to motivations they can identify with, the people are unlikely to change their ways. From the side of the national and international agencies active in the field very little has been done to identify motivational factors that may be utilised to achieve a better participation by the people. The main emphasis has been health education, simply because that is the main motivation from the national point of view. But whether this makes any sense from the individual point of view, remains a question. Experiences from other fields do not suggest that health is effective as a sales argument to change human behaviour. Driving after drinking alcohol is an invitation for accidents as we all know, but few of us take a taxi home after a party. We just drive home and press our luck a little. On a national scale we only have to look at the traffic statistics to see that this is taking a lot of lives. And even on a more personal and direct level, we all know that smoking may kill us through cancer, heart attacks and other long term effects. But we are all sure that this is true for our neighbours only and not for ourselves. Giving up smoking is often more related to group pressure:

the rejection of our behaviour by our friends - than to our concern about our own health. The same is true for changing sanitation behaviour, even more so since it is such a private and secretive part of our lives. In some cultures this is so explicit that it is even not supposed to exist, and consequently it cannot be discussed. In several areas in East Africa adult men are believed to live without defecation. An old man found defecating would lose his status and respect for proving to be as mortal and simple as women and children. The introduction of a latrine programme in such areas will obviously encounter fierce resistance. The construction of a latrine will not achieve much in such situations and the lack of awareness of motivational factors is defeating much of the good intentions of the sanitation programmes.

It is in response to the understanding, that without motivation knowledge - communication efforts are bound to fail, and that without effective communications aimed at motivations, that can be aroused little community participation is possible - that UNICEF and UNCHS have started to study implementation strategies that will result in a better acceptability and participation in this field. The changes in behaviour in the field of sanitation are probably more difficult to achieve than in other areas of human settlement development. Experiences have amply demonstrated that communications in this area are very difficult and often result in misinformation that adds to the difficulties in the projects. The latest survey of the Botswana sanitation programme showed that over 90% of the rural owners of ventilated pit latrines reported to wash their hands after each toilet visit, in spite of the fact that few have access to water anywhere near their latrine. They gave the answer that made the interviewer happy and did not tell the truth. Interviewing adults about sanitation is by and large a futile undertaking, because the surveyors are usually seen as the representatives of the authorities and interviews are therefore seen as inspections or tests of knowledge and not as neutral instruments of information.

Communicating with school children has shown to be much more effective. If given in a proper educational contexts children may giggle about the subject, but are likely to take the exercise seriously. They will see it as a learning exercise, discovering how things are and how things can be. If they perceive their own role as active participants in a joint learning and development process, they will not only make efforts to learn, discover and report, but they will not remain unaffected in this exercise. It will open them to participation in new and better ways of living.

In the past few months an experiential programme was executed in Machakos district in Kenya, where UNICEF included a demonstration sanitation programme in the schools in the framework of emergency relief in this famine prone area. In each of the schools rain water collection tanks and VIP latrines had been installed in the schools. The sanitation communication programme came as a follow up of the construction work. The schools received background information of latrine use and maintenance, which was distributed to the children and which was used by the teachers for some lessons on sanitation. The next step was a children's competition consisting of a general questionnaire of behaviour and existing conditions, and a survey by the children about traditional

beliefs and habits. The children were asked to talk to their grandparents about taboos, rules, beliefs and practices in the field of sanitation and report the results in drawings and essays.

The participation of the schools was very encouraging and there were many indications that children in their teens are much more reliable informants than any adult group that has been used earlier, including teachers, health workers, politicians and local leaders. The exercise showed the child channel effective in three distinct ways:

The excitement of a school competition resulted in a strong educational effect: much new knowledge was digested and this is likely to make them in the future more open to change. In other words the new knowledge will help to prevent traditional beliefs to gain an inflexible hold over the future behaviour of the individual and will help to promote change when that is introduced.

The children do not have to overcome the suspicion and fear that so often distorts the exchange of information between projects and participants, because there exists a relationship of trust and intimacy between them and their grandparents who are interviewed by them. Children are therefore quite reliable sources of information, provided that they are guided and motivated properly.

It was also found that the excitement of the children about the competition, the prizes, the role of being information agents and carriers of new information spilled over into the community at large. Their questions, the information leaflets they carried, the discussions they had with relatives, the drawings they made could not be avoided by the other members of the family. They could disregard it as unimportant, but could not avoid to be exposed to it. The competition served therefore also as a mobilising device, conditioning the community for the later adult communications as a part of the expected sanitation campaign.

The three factors: education of the future adults, more reliable information about existing conditions and the mobilisation effects on the community help the long process of change the development is. In a very sensitive field as sanitation it offers one of the few viable methods to achieve a realistic picture of the motivational factors that may promote or hamper such programmes: understanding the mechanism of change and developing the promotional strategies that will persuade people to change.

Lessons from Machakos

The Northern part of Machakos district is a marginal agricultural area that in times of drought easily is hit by misery and famine. Part of this area was earlier set aside as communal grazing land, but population pressure has opened the area in recent years for quite intensive settlement and the signs of environmental decay and erosion are now evident throughout the area. As a part of the emergency assistance following the recent drought, water and sanitation demonstrations were built at the primary schools and the sanitation study through school children involved eight school classes in the district. Some of the information gathered in this exercise confirmed previous beliefs: the importance of the schools as centre of development information, the discrepancy between the acceptance of development facilities and the

actual use of latrines does not lead to its acceptance, latrines are for most people associated with fear and not with development.

The importance of fear was one of the most striking findings, fears associated with black magic (35%), fear to be alone (14%), fear of snakes and other animals lurking in the latrine (86%), fear of falling into the pit (56%), fear of smell, filth and insects (40%), and just shame to be seen. It was not the lack of knowledge, but anxieties that made the children avoid the latrines. Neither was it the lack of access to latrines that caused this: all had access to latrines in the schools and even of those who had a latrine at home as many as 25% never used it. Even those who had to clean their own latrine at home preferred to use the bush instead. The emphasis on health education may reinforce this trend, because talk about disease in relation to latrines may increase the fear factor and actually discourage the use of latrines. Equally interesting was the finding that neighbours' latrines are never used and that neighbours are not asked to help in the construction of latrines. Where mutual self help is a cornerstone in low income housing, it does not seem to apply to the taboo area of sanitation. In this poor area it was interesting to note that as much as 52% of the latrines had been built with the help of craftsmen, and while latrine collapse was not uncommon, these fundi built-latrines had all escaped that fate. Health workers and the schools were equally important as sources of information about sanitation. Cleaning of latrines has been well accepted as a part of the use, - 61% clean it at least once a week - but there is little understanding about the role and behaviour of flies. While 63% complain about insects in latrines, as many as 71% do not use any cover over the latrine opening. The responses of the whole group indicated an eagerness towards development. But change without motivation can not receive any popular support. Modernisation in itself is appealing, but it must have a rationale, even for children. Proper social behaviour that will carry the approval of the community is one factor that counts. To have a latrine that is clean and does not produce insects and offensive smells will please the neighbours and is therefore a good thing to have. A latrine that is safe, gives privacy, does not smell, does not house insects or snakes and bats, a latrine that looks nice and modern, that is convenient and clean, that is permanent and strong and that is simple to maintain and use is an acceptable latrine. The knowledge that it improves the health of the neighbours may be appreciated in the future, but is irrelevant now. The fact that it does not offend the neighbour and that it is a key factor to win approval from other community members is more important than the conventional wisdom that it will improve your health.

Regional Co-operation

In this region sanitation is a particularly sensitive area and so far sanitation programmes have been much more successful construction programmes than as improvements in environmental health. Much of this failure is related to the use of the wrong communication channels: short term health education programmes during the construction phase. The long term success cannot be achieved if education approaches at all levels are ignored, which included child to child communications, extra curricular activities and even child adult communications.

Much of this can be achieved within the existing curricula. There is sufficient scope for environmental care education within the primary school subjects of science and health. It is therefore suggested that the co-operation of the educational authorities in the East and Southern African region will be sought to develop educational material in the field of water and sanitation, text books, exercise books, extra curricular activity programmes, and community self survey. This implies a review of the existing activities and educational programmes in this field in the region the testing of experimental surveys and sanitation information programmes involving primary schools as a parallel activity to planned water and sanitation projects. It would involve the exchange and review of the experiences between the countries in the region and the discussion of implementation strategies that focus on the educational and behavioural aspects of development. It is the purpose of this paper to provoke reactions from the various countries represented here and to enlist the support for possible experimental programmes in this fields in those countries.

The experiences from Machakos suggest that many of the conventional assumptions about the proper implementation of sanitation programmes are erroneous and that the poor results of such programmes can be explained in terms of traditional beliefs and established concepts which stand in conflict with the promotion arguments put forward by the sanitation projects. It also suggests that communications with children is a neglected area in the efforts to promote human settlement development and environmental care. Primary schools should therefore receive more attention as centres of formation of social behaviour and be used to install patterns of behaviour that confirm to the long term development aims of society. Educational programmes that go beyond the narrow constraints of academic knowledge and that promote the developmental change will help the future generation to make choices and set priorities towards progress and community emancipation.

Conclusions

Development is a process of change that requires time to adjust new behaviour to the relationship that one has to ones environment and to accept new views of oneself. Successful sanitation programmes have needed as much as ten years of continuous efforts to achieve this. Much of the struggle towards development is to overcome established behaviour that stands in conflict with the new way of life. For all adults it is a long and painful process. By involving adolescents in communications about developments they are helped to be conditioned towards change and will be saved much of the agony and conflicts that adults experience in the development process. In addition to that they can play a vital role in promoting the two way communications that are vital for development programmes in the field of human settlement. The inclusion of training and activities related to human settlement development in the primary education system is therefore an important step in the overall development process. The co-operation between the development institutions and the education establishment is therefore vital, while the exchange of experience between the different countries in the region will be beneficial to all the development of implementation strategies that agree with the people.

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