

Report

Alexandria Healthy City and Women's Development Project

K. Khosh-Chashm,¹ M.H. Abou Shabanah,² M. A Bakr,³ W. Menessy⁴ and A.O. Mansour⁵

Introduction

The healthy cities approach aims to place the health of every citizen at the centre of the social and political agendas of municipalities and local governments. The Healthy City and Women's Development (HCWD) project takes advantage of this as well as mobilizing women at the grassroots level to participate in improving their conditions. These projects have been applied in urban, semi-urban and rural settings. The healthy cities programme in the WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region started in 1990. The concept has gained momentum, and is now a popular and active programme in many countries of the Region.

WHO's role in promoting women's participation in health and development in countries is to advocate for and support the development of gender-sensitive policies and strategies in a multi-sectoral framework that cuts across divisions. The intended programmes, such as HCWD, are designed to show that developing women's potential can be instrumental to sustainable community development. The eight international conferences of the 1990s which

WHO participated in stressed that, the improvement of the status of women, including their empowerment, is central to all efforts to reach sustainable development in all of its economic, social, and environmental dimensions. The Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, 1995, also noted that, "it is essential to design, implement, and monitor, with full participation of women, the gender-sensitive policies and programmes." Initiatives at the local level, especially in non-traditional areas, have demonstrated that empowerment of women is among the approaches basic to the success of WHO's collaboration with countries.

Healthy City and Women's Development in Alexandria, Egypt

In Egypt, as in many middle- and low-income countries of the Region, there has been heavy migration from the rural areas to major urban areas. In Alexandria, unplanned slums have sprung up and grown rapidly. In such settlements, the environ-

¹Community-based Initiatives, WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean, Alexandria, Egypt.

²Women in Health and Development, WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean, Alexandria, Egypt.

³Research Institute for Soil, Water and Environment, Alexandria, Egypt.

⁴Faculty of Education, Alexandria University, Alexandria, Egypt.

⁵George Washington University, Washington DC, United States of America.

Received: 30/05/99; accepted: 09/06/99

mental conditions are poor and unemployment, especially among women, is very high. The health of the women and children in particular are at risk because of the poor economic and environmental conditions. Poor housing, lack of adequate services and institutional support for the settlements are serious political and social problems. In Alexandria, there are about 57 of these informal settlements.

The following are features of most of the informal settlements.

- Social services are inadequate.
- Environmental conditions are harmful to the health of residents.
- Population density is high.
- Awareness about environmental problems is lacking.
- The participation of women in community affairs is non-existent.
- There is the lack of community mobilization and action to improve the environment.
- Employment opportunities for all individuals, and especially for women, are scarce.

With the aforementioned conditions in mind, the Alexandria HCWD project was initiated to address the critical environmental and social problems with the full participation of women.

Project objectives

The following are the immediate objectives of the project.

- To empower all the residents, especially women, and to raise the awareness of the community in areas concerning environmental and social issues, maternal and child health, and the importance of educating the children.

- To generate income through environmentally-related economic activities.
- To improve environmental conditions so that immediate health hazards are avoided.

The following are the long-term objectives of the project.

- To attain a workable partnership between the representatives of the community and other partners working in the development of shanty-towns, with special emphasis on environmental improvement.
- To develop sustainable approaches and models that can be replicated in other areas with similar problems and conditions.

Description of the project

In 1996, an agreement was signed between the World Health Organization (WHO) and PLAN International, an international non-governmental organization (NGO), to initiate a public health and environmental project in the shanty-town areas or *gameyas* of Ganuoty, Hady Al-Nebowa and Omar Ibn Al-Khattab in Alexandria East District. The project approach and structure were designed in accordance with the healthy city programme concept and methods. The project was established as part of the community-based initiatives programme of WHO.

The stakeholders of the project include: educators from the University of Alexandria, the target communities (represented by local leaders), the women environmental promoters and government officials. The project demonstrated that interested and socially motivated university professors can play a very useful role in teaching critical topics to lower-income individuals.

It was agreed that both WHO and PLAN would provide technical and financial resources for the project. PLAN provided the areas with street-cleaning equipment, a waste collection system and 4000 trees. More trees have been planted in five other communities.

Staff of the WHO Regional Office, along with an environmental consultant from PLAN, developed a programme that enlisted professors from Alexandria University to train a number of women within the project areas. They were required to have a minimum of a secondary-school education. These trained women requested and received the title of "environmental promoters". They were selected to represent a cluster of streets in the three communities. The purpose of the training was to make the promoters into community facilitators, agents of change, and educators of community health and the environment. Since they are from the community they would be more effective in communicating with their neighbours in a friendly and informal way.

The three training courses focused on the following subjects:

- general environmental problems
- the connection between the population explosion and degradation of the environment
- the effects of all types of pollution on the health of the individual
- principles of food safety
- solid waste disposal and recycling
- the importance of green areas
- how to start a small business
- health education: first aid, hazards of tobacco, the harms of certain traditional practices (female genital mutilation)
- communication skills in relation to local development.

Achievements

There were visible improvements in the environmental conditions in less than 1 year from when the project was implemented. Perhaps as important as the physical improvements in the areas, were the improvements in the public health and environmental awareness of the residents. Women environmental promoters working with WHO and PLAN showed that they were capable of retaining knowledge concerning health and the environment and disseminating this information in the local community.

So far the environmental promoters have conducted 80 "awareness workshops", benefiting almost 2000 women. The lectures were performed once a month and each lecture was attended by 25 women. The environmental promoters provided training to the women of households on cleaning the environment inside and outside the home. They also held monthly environmental workshops in the community activity centres to raise children's awareness. Approximately 100 children have benefited from the eight training sessions and lectures. In the summer more training sessions are held since children have more free time during that period.

This approach demonstrates that it is possible to implement practical problem-oriented projects based on Agenda 21 at local levels by training women and strengthening local committees with women's participation. Indeed, there has been a strategic role change for women in the project areas. They identify the community needs and influence the decisions taken by the committee regarding not only the environment, but also the welfare of the community members. Today, this type of local development is becoming well established in the three project areas in the East District of Alexandria.

Other specific achievements include:

- Since the initial agreement between WHO and PLAN, seven other *gameyas* have joined the project, bringing the total number of WHO/PLAN project areas to 10. This was because the activities that the HCWD project initiated in the first three *gameyas* were spread by word of mouth.
- The project has resulted in a close partnership between city authorities, local authorities and members of the community, as visualized in the healthy city concept.
- Women have become empowered to participate in community activities that concern health and the environment.
- Productive competition between communities or even between individuals within the same community has emerged as a result of the project. For example, one of the environmental promoters established a competition for the cleanest street in her area and invited the media to publicize the activities.
- Income-generating projects related to the environment and health have been established: for example, the preparation of hygienic food for school-children; the reuse of solid waste and transforming it into items for sale; and other methods of recycling that could provide an income for individuals.
- School sanitary conditions have improved and "healthy school" programmes have been established.

Obstacles

There were four main obstacles that provided a challenge to the implementation of the project:

- The high level of poverty acted as a barrier to community contribution for so-

cial projects. Therefore, the sustainability of the project in the early phases depended on assistance from outside donors.

- The low level of self-esteem and confidence of the individuals in the community were initially a barrier to understanding and communication.
- The environmental promoters were looking for monetary incentives during the projects. They were given stipends and are now becoming engaged in income-generating activities related to the environment and health.
- The participation of local women in the process at times presented a challenge to the male community leaders. This was overcome by highlighting the role of women in reaching out to the household women and educating them about improving their environmental conditions. Emphasizing the role of women in complementing men's roles has proven to be effective.

Lessons learned

- Partnerships between international agencies, local authorities, educational institutions and the target community are crucial tools for bringing the synergy of different organizations to improve the conditions in poorer communities.
- The success of the project attracted major donors. The Egyptian Swiss Development Fund provided US\$ 850 000 to expand the project activities to non-project areas. The Social Fund for Development has also committed a sum of money toward the HCWD project.
- The concept of incorporating the role of women into environmental health has spread to other countries of the Eastern

Mediterranean Region, such as Afghanistan, Jordan and the Syrian Arab Republic. The project methodology has even spread to countries outside the Region.

- Educating household women on issues concerning the environment and health can be achieved effectively by mobilizing other local women. Community-out-reach programmes are easier to implement and are sustainable when local individuals are involved.
- When women are trained and made aware of certain issues, the male community leaders may accept their non-traditional roles in community affairs.
- Training individuals and providing them with specific duties in their communities raises their self-esteem.

- Teamwork changes the attitude of people from focusing on individual needs to concentrating on community needs.
- The project is replicable and can spread easily when good results are achieved in one area.
- In low-income areas, the income-generating activities and awareness campaigns are useful entry points for other development activities that relate to the environment, school improvement and health care.

Finally, it must be emphasized that this project can be considered a prototype for other models of the healthy cities and villages initiatives. These models can be applied to other low-income informal settlements in the 23 countries within the Eastern Mediterranean Region.

Sources

1. Khosh-Chashm K. The impact of urbanization on health in the countries of the Eastern Mediterranean Region. *Eastern Mediterranean health journal*, 1998, 4 (suppl.):S137-48.
2. *Building a healthy city: practitioners guide*. Geneva, World Health Organization, 1995.
3. *Healthy cities guidelines for the development of healthy cities projects and activities*. Alexandria, WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean, 1997.
4. Agenda 21. In: *Earth Summit 92, The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, Rio de Janeiro 1992*. London, Regency Press Corporation, 1992.
5. *Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action*. Fourth World Conference on Women, New York, United Nations, 1995.
6. *Proceedings of the 16th Annual Conference of the Law and Medicine Association, Alexandria, Egypt, 1998*. Alexandria, Law and Medicine Association, 1998.