

DAILY NATION

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OPINION

Driving community health from the grassroots

By PETER NGATIA Posted Monday, August 31 2009 at 18:56

A FEW YEARS AGO, BUMULA village in Busia District had one of the highest rates of death in Kenya for children under five and mothers as a result of malaria. Of every 1,000 babies born, 144 lost their lives to malaria, as did 680 of every 100,000 mothers.

Today, Bumula people are the driving force behind a campaign to reduce deaths of children and mothers from malaria and other preventable causes.

Women encourage each other to attend ante-natal clinics, where they are given mosquito nets for themselves and their babies; children have formed health clubs to teach fellow pupils about how to prevent malaria, and health workers go out into the community to promote healthy living.

THE BUSIA CHILD SURVIVAL PROJECT, implemented by the African Medical and Research Foundation (Amref) working with the district's health management team, is an example of successful application of community-based development to address social issues by putting grassroots people at the centre of the development process.

It is an approach in which communities cease to be passive partakers of the process of change and become drivers of that change. It is a continuous, internal process that builds on the wealth of human and social capital that exists in the community, and may be enhanced or accelerated by outside assistance.

Its primary purpose is to help individuals and communities to gain greater control of their lives by giving them opportunities and resources to develop knowledge, skills and motivation to pursue positive change to their personal circumstances and in their communities.

The term community can mean both "community of place" and "community of interest". A community of place refers to a group of people who are identified with a geographical area, such as a village or a division. A community of interest applies to people who engage in a common task or have a common purpose, like pupils, pastoralists or truck drivers, although not necessarily in the same locality.

In the context of health, communities are bound by common health needs or shared interests. They coalesce around neighbourhoods, schools or factories, or they can be groups of people with particular health needs such as lack of clean water, who suffer from diseases like malaria or who live with disability.

Community-based development is applicable to all sectors of the economy. In public health, it is commonly referred to as community-based healthcare – the main pillar of which is the people’s active participation in the promotion of health, prevention of disease and management of common ailments.

The challenge, however, is that most communities, particularly marginalised ones, are often in social and economic paralysis and may depend on outside expertise and assistance to catalyse such development.

Years of reliance on donor funding and implementation of projects crafted in the West have obscured the fact that African communities are rich in knowledge, human capital and material assets that have been misused or underexploited.

Donors and development agents must study the communities, consult them and interact with them in order to understand them holistically, then work with them to assess their needs and establish how best to meet them.

The use of local resources such as manpower and skills, and of social capital such as community structures, is critical. Projects must seek to add value to existing community structures and systems in order to strengthen and sustain them.

COMMUNITY-BASED DEVELOPMENT is not only relevant to addressing contemporary health problems facing Africa, but is also consistent with various African government declarations, focusing on empowerment of communities for the improvement of their people’s health and quality of life.

With the continental shift towards enabling communities to become the drivers of their own development, sustained attention needs to be paid to integrating partnering with communities, building their capacities for effectiveness, and researching into how best to deliver services to the people.

All the while, the dignity, resources, structures and systems of the communities should be respected. They know what their needs are; all they need is support.

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