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HEALTH FOR LIFE **TECHNICAL BRIEF**

STRONGER SYSTEMS, HEALTHIER LIVES

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Promoting Responsiveness to Community Health Needs Through Local Radio in Rural Nepal

Importance of accountability to local health

USAID's Health for Life, a health system strengthening project, works with the Government of Nepal to improve the functioning of their decentralized, locally-administered health system, among other goals. One of the keys to building a responsive and functional health system is to ensure transparency and accountability through ongoing dialogue between the community, health workers and local health officials. Creating a space in which members of the community can engage in conversation with staff from the health facility and members of local government is a necessary precondition for success of the decentralized approach that the Government of Nepal is adopting.

The challenge of open dialogue

Nepal, with its incredible social diversity, has the potential for rich public dialogue. Because it is a young democracy and society is structured by a strict social hierarchy, however, it is often difficult for traditionally marginalized citizens to voice their concerns. Social dynamics that have been in place for generations serve to discourage dissent and challenges to authority. A student, for example, cannot challenge her teacher. How, then, can members of a community be expected to hold Health Facility In-charges or District Health Officers accountable?

The goal was to create a forum where people felt comfortable voicing their concerns, and at the same time amplify their voices. *Radio Bahas* is the solution that Health for Life came up with. In partnership with the Antenna Foundation, a local NGO that specializes in media advocacy and awareness-raising, *Radio Bahas*, meaning 'radio debate' holds monthly, town hall-style meetings each month where community members meet as a group with health officials to get answers to their questions and find solutions to their problems. The assumption is that people feel more comfortable asking tough questions of health authorities when supported by a group of their peers.



Harnessing the power of public debate and broadcasting to bring about changes to local health systems

Methodology

Every month, in twenty-eight VDCs with the highest levels of marginalized populations in each of Health for Life's fourteen core districts, producers from local radio stations moderate a town hall-like meeting, inviting members of the community to speak with a panel made up of representatives of the District Health office, the local health facility and other health workers.

Community members, typically a group of around 50, ask questions or voice particular concerns about the health system, and the panel responds. The interactions are recorded, edited and broadcast on the local radio station every week over the following month, allowing a wide section of the local population to hear information about health services and health issues that are relevant and tailored to the local context.

Outcomes

There have been a number of positive results. Perhaps the most important impact has been to demonstrate that when members of the local community come together, they are emboldened as a group to ask questions and raise issues that could not be brought up during one-on-one interactions with health authorities. This is critical not only to making improvements to health services, but a key element of other activities related to decentralized governance. As Nepal moves towards a federal structure, active participation by citizens and greater transparency will form the foundation of successful local governance.

Looking more specifically at the impact the approach has had on the health system, there are many instances where the community was able to hold health authorities to account; once an issue has been raised and broadcast to the community at large, there was simply too much pressure from the community for public health figures to ignore it. In one community, in response to a question about why an x-ray machine wasn't working, it was revealed that the electricity bill hadn't been paid in several months, in turn leading to concerns about the viability of vaccines that require refrigeration. Within two weeks of *Radio Bahas* being broadcast, the bill had been paid and electricity was restored. Elsewhere, a community successfully lobbied for funds earmarked for one project to be rerouted to build a small clinic, something that was desperately needed but hadn't previously come to fruition. In still another community, a blood drive was set up while in another *Radio Bahas* raised demand for intrauterine contraceptive devices (IUCDs).

Radio Bahas was also successful, as mentioned earlier, in drawing out health issues specific to the community. By tapping into local health concerns and then rebroadcasting them to the wider community, it gives legitimacy to people's concerns, inspires others to think about their roles in demanding improvements, and provides health information that is eminently relevant to their community.

Challenges

The biggest challenge to the successful implementation of *Radio Bahas* has been the logistical hurdles, both in terms of conducting the public hearing and with regard to the capacity of small, local radio stations to produce the program. Because many of the communities in which *Radio Bahas* has been conducted are quite remote, bringing the necessary equipment – speakers, microphones, audio recorders – often by motorcycle, has been the source of difficulty. That said, it is not an insurmountable problem, merely one that needs to be taken into consideration when planning.

The other issue that sometimes came up was the capacity of local radio stations to edit the material in a coherent manner. Most radio stations had not produced original content prior to *Radio Bahas*, and had focused on broadcasting pre-recorded programs. This, too, was overcome through the dedicated support of the subcontractor, despite taking more time and resources than initially anticipated.

Conclusions

Overall, *Radio Bahas* has been a resounding success in terms of strengthening participation in local governance, giving a voice to marginalized groups, holding health authorities accountable, implementing improvements to local health services and laying the groundwork for federalism in the future. Considering the success of *Radio Bahas*, it is safe to assume that the public hearing format could yield similar results in other development areas, whether conducted by non-governmental organizations or by the government itself.

Health for Life

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