

CASE STUDY 78

Citizens Voice Influencing Health District Governance!

'If the people reject you, the government will also reject you!'

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Context

The World Health Organisation recognises that poor governance at district health services results in corruption, patient vulnerability, lack of rule of law, poor patient information, unsafe healthcare practices and poor quality of service³³. In the systemic quality improvement assessment of the Millennium Development Goals, health governance in Cameroon scored lowest in national health sector performance and was identified as key in low performance on health related Millennium Development Goals³⁴.

In Cameroon, communities are represented in the health district management committees that have been set up by the ministry of public health to facilitate social control and community participation at public hospitals. The committees however lack the capacity to play this role and often feel more accountable to the health authorities than to the community that elected them. The result was that communities did not participate in health district decision-making.

Clients

The health committees of the districts Ndop and Ndu approached the Netherlands Development Organisation (SNV) for capacity development. Ndop and Ndu are in the North West Region of Cameroon and have populations of around 200,000 and 100,000 respectively. The members of the health committees are elected by the community to represent them at district level; they work as volunteers and often depend on the District Health Services for stipends. An agreement was developed between SNV and the two health committees to facilitate social control at district level through capacity and knowledge development.

Methods and SNV Intervention

In the intervention SNV choose to collaborate with the Bamenda University of Science and Technology (BUST), because as an academic institution, BUST is well placed to develop tools that could be incorporated into medical students' curriculum. To make the health district management committees more influential, they need to know what is going on in the hospitals and how patients are treated. Therefore, SNV and BUST decided to develop a questionnaire that can be used to collect data from patients. The questionnaire served as a start of a process whereby patients will be asked to score hospital quality of services from their point of view and these results will be used to inform the health committees on how to improve the quality of care.

SNV and BUST developed the questionnaires with inputs from the health committees of Ndop and Ndu collected through focus group discussions and debates. In addition, 32 members from the health committees were trained in using this tool and the interpretation of data. Practical sessions were held with supervision from BUST and SNV in which a total of 450 patients were interviewed. The results of the questionnaires were interpreted by the health committees and discussed during meetings with district medical officers and district health service authorities.

³³ WHO, Linkages between health and human rights, 2002

³⁴ Lightening-Eclairages. Jan 2010 Strategic health information bulletin Cameroon

Outcome

The health district management committees now have a tool to measure user satisfaction and have developed their capacity to use the results to influence district level decisions. With this tool they can identify healthcare aspects for which patients are not satisfied with and use it to recommend areas for improvement.

The intervention of SNV and BUST won the Global Forum Award for Health Equity: www.globalforumhealth.org/Media-Publications/Archive-news/Civil-Society-Organizations-awarded-US-10-000.

Impact

The use of the data collected with the questionnaires by the health committees, has had several impact, such as the empowerment of patients. It was discovered that patient satisfaction depends on their expectations and most patients expect very little from hospital staff. It was therefore decided to empower patients through media information. SNV did this through a series of field visits and working with media houses.

Another impact is the reduction in corruption. For example, it was also discovered that the district pharmacy was constantly out of stock despite adequate central level drug supplies. The health committees started discussions with the authorities as to why this is happening and possible actions that can be taken to avoid that subsidised medicines are sold on the black market.

In addition, the quality of services has been improved, as health authorities are more aware of what the patients are dissatisfied with. For example in Ntumbaw patients were not happy with the lack of bed sheets on beds. After discussions with the chief of center, it became apparent to her that there was need to improve this in order to keep her community utilising her institution.

Lessons learnt

A key lesson that was learned was that patient satisfaction depends on their expectations; they could therefore be satisfied with health services that are very poor and exploitative if their expectations are low. For example a patient who does not even expect to meet a healthcare worker at the hospital will be very grateful to pay extra for services.

Way forward

Communication tools (media discussions, debates and dramas – 'media DDD') can be used to empower patient on their rights to affordable and quality healthcare.

A mobile version of user satisfaction assessment can be developed; this will reduce bias and ensure anonymity in responding patients.

There is need to follow up on incorporation of users satisfaction assessment into medical students curriculum.

Selling this approach to the Ministry of Health and other development organisation will also help to scale out the approach, especially since the health sector strategy recognises social control as key to viable health district development.

Quotes

'We are happy that a small tool like this one can direct us on the best improvements to make.' John Boneke, Chairman of Ndop Health District Management Committee.

'This is what we will need to make decisions with the decentralisation process.' Ntoh Daniel, Mayor of Ndop Municipality.

'You know by methods, it is founded upon the observance of trifles.' Sherlock Holmes in *The Boscombe Valley Mystery*.



Ndu HDMC chairman transfers skills to a health member an intern from SNV supervises



Ntumbaw Health centre now has bed area DS sheets on the bed after HDMC influence.