IDENTIFYING OUR OWN PROBLEMS
Working With Communities for Participatory PHE Research

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Determining the most important development challenges at the community level can be difficult, especially when they entail complex cause-and-effect relationships across different sectors. This case study relates the story of how World Neighbors (a nongovernmental development organization) involved community members in identifying both critical development challenges and the relationships among those challenges in their community. World Neighbors then supported a process through which the community members formed a plan of action to achieve their goals in the areas of livelihoods, natural-resource management, and reproductive health.

Background: Cabacnitan

The *barangay* (the Filipino term for a village, district, or ward) of Cabacnitan is located in the

southern tip of Batuan, Bohol, a municipality in the Loboc Watershed. Loboc Watershed covers four protected areas: the Chocolate Hills National Monument, the Rajah Sikatuna National Park, the Loboc Watershed Reforestation Project, and the Loay Marine Reserve.

Cabacnitan occupies 311 hectares (about one-third of which is within the protected area) and is five kilometers from the national highway. It has a population of 785 people in 135 households (as of 2001) and has no *barangay* health station. Farming is the main occupation of its residents.

Part 1: Problems in Cabacnitan

It was Monday afternoon. Lolo Jose was sitting on the floor by the doorstep of a bamboo house, listening to an old transistor radio.

"Lolo, I am back. How are you?" said Inday, approaching her grandfather.

"Oh Inday, why are you back from the city? I did not expect to see you again until our town fiesta next month," Lolo Jose responded in surprise.

"I met an 'accident,'" Inday explained, sobbing. "I am pregnant and my employer kicked me out. What will I do now? I can no longer work and help our family."

Lolo Jose tried to get some water for Inday to drink but the jar was empty. He sighed and turned back to his granddaughter. "It is okay, Inday," he said. "It is not uncommon for a girl to get pregnant. Two of your friends also came back from Manila last month. They are pregnant just like you." Lolo Jose consoled Inday.

Rene, a development worker with World Neighbors, came by. She stopped momentarily, wanting to join the conversation of the grandfather and granddaughter. Listening to them talking, Rene was speechless. She began to wonder how a development program could address a problem like Inday's, a problem that was increasingly common in Cabacnitan.

Other challenges were also mounting in the rural *barangay*. Rene had just come from a meeting with the *barangay* captain, who described to her how the farming situation of the *barangay* had changed over the years. Because irrigation water had become increasingly scarce, the people of the *barangay* were converting more and more of their rice fields into corn production. The farmers now felt it was better to grow corn since it needs less
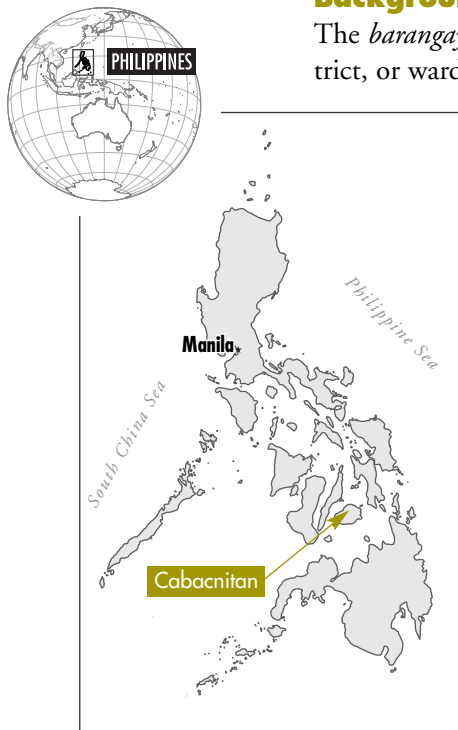
water and takes only three months from planting to harvest, while producing rice takes much longer. But even with these changes, the farmers worried that they were still not producing enough to adequately feed their families.

Back in her office, Rene went through a shelf of reading materials, trying to find a model for programs that address such interrelated problems on a community level. She called up her friends in other NGOs, asking about projects that respond to the problems of teenage pregnancy, water scarcity, and food insecurity together, but met with no luck. She was frustrated.

The following week, Rene returned to Cabacnitan and met Jojo, the technician fielded by the Soil and Water Conservation Foundation (SWCF) in Cabacnitan. Jojo told her that the SWCF had been working in Cabacnitan for three months and that it had conducted a natural-resource-management needs assessment of the *barangay*; he added that a farmers' organization (BACOD) had been formed in the village to share information on sustainable farming practices.

Rene's face lit up. She was delighted to learn that some work had been done to address some of the difficult living conditions in Cabacnitan. However, there was still the challenge of addressing teenage pregnancy resulting from the out-migration of young girls to work in big cities. And she began to wonder if there were other problems that the people were not talking about. "Why did Inday's mother die?" Rene wondered. "Why did young girls have to leave Cabacnitan? Why did they get pregnant at a young age? How do the women perceive this situation? What do men think about it?"

The next morning, Rene realized that the solution to Cabacnitan's problems wasn't likely to be found in any of the books on her shelf. As an outsider, she knew she couldn't fully grasp the extent of the challenges in the *barangay* or understand how those challenges related to each other. The problems of the village could only be solved by the community itself, and Rene trusted that, with guidance and support, the women, men, and youth of the community had the capacity to reverse the village's worsening conditions and improve their lives.

Rene also realized that the local government would need to be key players in the development process in Cabacnitan. She decided to talk with Babes—a project coordinator for Kauswagan Community Social Development Center, World Neighbors' partner in Cabacnitan—about how they might get the community involved in their efforts.

Consulting Health Staff and Community Leaders

Rene and Babes made a plan to get the community involved in addressing Cabacnitan's challenges. As a first step, they met with Batuan's municipal health officer and her staff.

"What kinds of reproductive health issues exist in your municipality?" Babes asked the health workers. A young volunteer doctor told stories of adolescent boys and girls engaging in sexual activities, explaining that "most, if not all, teenagers who marry do so because the young

woman is pregnant." Dr. Nenita Tumanda, the municipal health officer, said she had female clients who had many children and wanted to use contraceptives. "My department needs training on family planning to be able to help women who no longer want to have children," Dr. Tumanda said.

Rene engaged the municipal health staff in a guided discussion on the reproductive health problems in the municipality. She put on the floor a large piece of paper with a table that helped identify the reproductive health problems of males and females at different ages. "We have many cases of teenage pregnancy and reproductive tract infections affecting men 20 to 45 years old," offered one staff member. These issues were two among many health problems identified by the Batuan health staff.

To narrow down their knowledge of the community health conditions to Cabacnitan, which is just one *barangay* among many in the municipality, Rene and Babes engaged the village leaders of Cabacnitan in the same process. The discussion showed that Inday was not at all an isolated case. One community member explained that the conflict between the government and the New People's Army, a communist-based revolutionary group in the Philippines, had resulted in disoriented social relationships in the community; consequentially, sexual values and interaction in the *barangay* had changed. Others confirmed that childbearing before and beyond marriage had started to become a common occurrence.

The *barangay* officials and the officers of BACOD who participated in the discussion decided to further investigate their problems by doing a community needs assessment on reproductive health. Together, they drew up a set of criteria for identifying research volunteers who would be trained to collect data for the community needs assessment. They decided they would recruit volunteers who could read and write, hear and listen, do simple calculations, had respect within the community, and could commit time to the research activity.

Discussion Questions

1. What problems do you see in Cabacnitan, and how do you think they might be related?

2. Why did Rene think it was necessary to involve the community in identifying and addressing the problems of the *barangay*? What are the biggest benefits of involving the community in development projects?

3. What kinds of challenges do you think Rene and Babes might face in getting the community to be involved?

4. Why did Rene and Babes begin by consulting the municipal health staff? What are the advantages of using this approach?

Part 2: Training Community Volunteers

Once the *barangay* officials had identified a group of research volunteers from the community, Babes talked with each of them to describe their tasks and find out their preferences for the time and place of the training as well as their needs for transportation or other kinds of support. A month later, Babes and Rene convened the group to provide an orientation to the goals of their work and provide the necessary research-skills training. There were 14 community research volunteers, with one man and one woman from each of the seven *puroks* (administrative subdivisions) in Cabacnitan.

Rene engaged the volunteer researchers in a series of experiential learning exercises. Using the information on reproductive health issues that Rene and Babes had gathered from the municipal health staff and community leaders, the volunteers developed questions on these issues for use in focus groups and a household questionnaire. The issues included sexual behavior; family planning; health conditions of women during pregnancy, childbirth, and after delivery; health practices; and gender relations. The volunteers pretested their new Focus Group Discussion Guides and Household Survey Questionnaire among themselves, practicing asking questions and writing down responses.

Collecting Data

The volunteer researchers were now ready to begin their research among community members in the *barangay*. Equipped with supplies and materials from Kauswagan and supported by Che-che, a Kauswagan community organizer, the research volunteers collected data in focus group discussions and household surveys throughout the next month. Male researchers interviewed and facilitated focus group discussions among male respondents, while female researchers did the same with female respondents. Kauswagan provided meals for the research volunteers and focus group discussion participants.

The information gathered in these focus group discussions was used to further refine the household survey questionnaire. For example, the family planning methods men and women separately identified during focus group discussions were listed in the household questionnaire as possible responses. The results of the household survey showed the extent of use of each of the family planning methods in the village.

Sustaining the Interest of Volunteer Researchers

Rene and Babes realized that they would need to plan carefully to keep the research volunteers motivated and engaged throughout the data collection process. In addition to providing meals, materials, and uniform shirts to the volunteers and community members during the focus group discussions, Rene and Babes planned periodic check-ins with the team of volunteers. During these check-in meetings, Rene and Babes solicited feedback on the volunteers' work such as inspiring stories and challenging situations. They also provided guidance on the next steps for the volunteers. They kept on reminding them that their leadership and untiring efforts could awaken the community to initiate changes toward their own development.

Analyzing and Presenting Results

Over the next several weeks, the volunteers collected, collated, and analyzed the research data. They then put the results onto charts and presented their work to the community through a *barangay* assembly. The presentation was attended by officials of the municipal government—including the *barangay* captain, the municipal health officer, the midwife assigned in the *barangay*, the municipal social welfare and development officer, and those municipal councilors representing local committees on health and women.

After hearing the presentation, the community members attending the assembly affirmed that the survey results were correct and the problems it identified were true. The municipal health officer listened while the people discussed why the community had low adoption rates of family planning methods and why they preferred traditional birth attendants to professional midwives. The discussion boiled down to the absence of a health station in the village and the discouragement community members had met when they tried to visit the health station in the next *barangay* or Rural Health Unit.

The village meeting ended with the formation of a group of community planners from among the volunteer researchers from each of the *puroks*. *Barangay* leaders selected representatives who had the following characteristics: They had creative ideas; they were critical thinkers; they were open-minded, expressive, enthusiastic, optimistic, and sincere; and they could commit time to attend an extensive planning workshop. The 12 *barangay* planners included seven women and five men ages 23 to 63.

After the community confirmed the needs identified during the assessment, the villagers got ready for developing community plans to address

Volunteers in Cabacnitan examine the range of problems identified through the community needs assessment.

their needs. The following month, the community planning team made a cross-visit to a reproductive health project in San Miguel, Bohol, to learn the approaches that project used to address reproductive health problems at the community level.

Discussion Questions

5. Which techniques did Rene and Babes use to ensure full participation from the research volunteers? What other strategies have you used to recruit and retain volunteers?

6. Rene and Babes recruited one male and one female research volunteer from each *purok* in Cabacnitan. Why might they have thought this balance was important?

7. Why would Rene and Babes ask the research volunteers to present the results instead of presenting the data themselves?

Part 3: Taking Action Through the Community Planning Workshop

With the community's needs identified and with community research volunteers having obtained ideas on how to address these problems, Rene and Babes facilitated a workshop through which the volunteer community planners formed their community development plan.

The planners reviewed all the problems and issues that emerged from the research, including those on natural-resource management and reproductive health. They wrote these issues on large cards that were then spread out on the floor. They connected the problems with arrows indicating cause/effect relationships, creating a "problem tree." One card—low farm production and income—had many arrows coming in and out of it, and the planners agreed this was their main problem. They used the problem tree to demonstrate how the other problems related to low farm production and income (see Box 1).

Rene's attention was rapt as the planners traced and explained the cause/effect relationships of the problems identified in the problem tree. "Having many children results in more family needs and low income," explained Nang Ale, one of the planners. "The family size grows, but the farm size doesn't. The farm gets smaller and smaller as parents divide their land among their children."

"When farms are overused due to the pressure to produce food for the family, they become less and less productive," added Noy Meling, another member of the planning team. "We are forced to move into the forest because the soil there is still fertile. However, I have noticed that water for the rice fields has receded. I think it is the result of *kaingin* (clearing land from trees and shrubs by cutting and burning them and using the land for agriculture)."

Nang Ebing stood up and pointed to the arrow she had drawn linking low production and income to out-migration and teenage pregnancies. "Families are forced to send their young girls to Manila to work as house helpers so that they could send back money to their families," she explained. "However, many of them come home pregnant because of sexual abuse and unsafe sexual relationships with peers of the opposite sex in Manila."

The process allowed the community planners to identify and illustrate the links among these

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Box 1

Problem Tree Analysis

Problem tree analysis is a community activity for analyzing data from a community needs assessment to be used for community planning. It is carried out using blank cards, large sheets of paper, marking pens, and masking tape.

Community representatives review the needs and problems identified in the needs assessment, write each of them on a blank card, and spread them out on a wide sheet of paper. With marking pens, the participants trace the cause/effect relationships of the needs and problems. They draw arrows from a "cause card" to an "effect card," keeping in mind that a need or a problem can be both a cause and an effect.

The need/problem with the most number of arrows coming in and going out is considered the main problem (the tree trunk). Tracing back, the needs/problems with arrows going into the main problem are considered the causes (the tree roots), and those with arrows coming out of the main problem are considered the effects (the tree branches and leaves). On another sheet of large paper, the participants arrange the cards to make the problem tree. From the problem tree, the community develops its plan.

reproductive health and natural-resource management problems. Using the problem tree, the community planners drafted their action plans with a set of objectives, timeframes, responsible persons, locally available resources, and other necessary resources.

After the workshop, Rene wore a big smile. She was very happy looking back at the entire process. She saw that the regular meetings with the community volunteers to share updates and feedback (as well as to decide on the next steps) had been one of the keys to sustaining the volunteers' interest and ensuring their ongoing involvement.

The community needs assessment uncovered the answers to many of Rene's questions. It brought the community's problems to the surface and clearly showed how each related to another. The assessment also made people think and talk about the relationships among the problems as well as to begin to plan how to address them in a holistic manner.

Next Challenges

In December, Babes and Rene sat down together to draw up a program that would support the community in implementing their community development plan. Babes and Rene recognized that taking action as soon as possible—while the community volunteers had the memory of the community planning workshop fresh in their

minds—was critical to maintaining the momentum of their work.

The new year saw Babes working with the municipal and *barangay* governments to identify strategies to increase capacity in the community in Cabacnitan and to support them in the implementation of their plans. With the united support and engagement of the community, Babes and Rene were confident that the community had made an important first step in addressing its development challenges.

Discussion Questions

8. Are participatory approaches for community research particularly useful for projects that involve issues from different sectors such as health and economic development? Why or why not?

9. Sustaining community involvement over long periods of time can be a challenge. What kind of advice might you give to Rene and Babes in their efforts to ensure effective participatory processes throughout the implementation of the community development plan?

10. This is one example of an approach to participatory research and planning. What other kinds of approaches or methods have you learned about or used in your own work?

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