

Community participation in health, a public health challenge

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Introduction

The development of services designed to address citizens' needs is a continuous process that belongs to the State's inherent activities. The capacity of individuals to develop their daily activities without serious hindrances, and to ensure their own welfare, depends on these services.

Therefore, the relationship between government and society must move from governability to governance, which is based on three dimensions (democracy, development and rights¹⁶⁾ and implies the active participation of the population to generate and build co-responsibility and achieve changes.

Since these services are developed and implemented through the economic contributions of citizens, they constitute an obligation of the State. However, this does not ensure that all contributors receive the services they need. In the case of health, for example, there are still communities that lack basic health services and whose wellbeing is therefore compromised.

The inclusion of such services within a geographical area determines the welfare of the area's total population. Hence, their absence can wreak havoc in people's health and generate mistrust towards the authorities or political representatives.

The State cannot attend to all the needs of each of the geographical areas that, together, constitute the nation. For this reason, activities that expose these deficiencies are of vital importance. One of these is community participation, which is generated through the observation, knowledge and recognition of citizen needs in order to obtain basic services through peaceful strategies.

Community participation is an activity that groups different processes in order to make joint decisions that will meet the needs of a community. While the particular needs and the specific solution that addresses them are exclusive to that community, they serve as an example to others.

Community participation, which depends on a modification of community behavior, is key to the procurement of services through strategies that communicate the needs of citizens to the State. The objectives of this essay are the following: 1) to evidence and develop the relevance of community participation in the procurement of public health services, and 2) to analyze the scope of this civic process as well as its inherent limitations, in order to understand the lack of a broader dynamic of citizen participation.

What is community participation and why is it important?

The term Community Participation is multidimensional. We will start from the following definitions in order to generate a better understanding of the term: 1) "participation", according to the Royal Spanish Academy, comes from the verb "to participate", and means "to take part in something"¹; 2) "community" refers to a group of individuals united by common characteristics, whether they be constitutive of a culture, a religion or simply of territorial

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belonging.² At the Alma Ata conference, "community participation" was defined as the process in which individuals and families assume responsibility for their own health and well-being, and that of the community, improving their capacity to contribute to their economic and community development.³

On the other hand, Mulet and Castanedo⁴ point out that community participation stems from "reflexive and continuous processes based on the accumulation of experiences and the democratization of knowledge through which communities organize themselves to achieve better living conditions, achieve their interests, and establish their needs and priorities" (p.125).

Considering the above definitions, it is possible to define community participation as the process through which the citizens of a geographic region identify their needs and, through different activities, develop strategies to improve the necessary services to secure their welfare and that of their community, to the benefit of the following generations. The success of community participation in one community provides an example that can be followed by other communities, regions, or countries.

Community participation for the implementation of public health services.

As mentioned in the previous point, community participation is a reflexive process based on the recognition of a community's needs, which refer to the services necessary for the development of the citizens' daily lives, including health.

Health services are essential within any social sector. Preventive and curative programs, citizens' quality of life, and the reduction morbidity and mortality, depend on them. These services are directly dependent on the State. Thus, their absence or precariousness deeply affects communities. Through community participation, communities can reveal their needs and seek to fulfill them through different strategies.

In this regard, in 1978 the World Health Organization (WHO) indicated community participation as a central strategic axis for the achievement of "health for all" by the year 2000.^{5,8} At the same time, the same institution recognized

health as a fundamental human right for all people, a statement that is directly linked to the objectives of the organization, which claims to seek "the state of complete physical, emotional and social well-being"⁵.

Given the scope and relevance of the institution (WHO), its objectives are a reference for different nations in the development of health goals, as well as in the understanding of health as a fundamental human right that everyone should enjoy without discrimination.

Moreover, in the international conference on Primary Health Care held in Alma Ata in 1978, it was mentioned that everyone should have access to Primary Health Care (PHC) and participate in it, to generate a shift towards greater equity, community participation and intersectoriality,⁵ and thus combat existing inequalities in health, which are unnecessary, avoidable, and unjust,² without neglecting governments' responsibilities towards their eradication.

However, several limitations have hindered governments and communities in the achievement of these goals, making the objectives set by the international guidelines far from attainable.

Of these limitations, perhaps the most important is encapsulated in the term "Social Determinants of Health", defined by WHO as "the circumstances in which people are born, grow, live, work and age, including the health care system",⁶ and "the broader set of forces and systems that influence the conditions of everyday life",⁷ resulting from the distribution of money, power and resources at the global, national and local levels, which in turn depends on the policies adopted, a situation experienced by multiple regions in different countries.

Community participation responds to economic differences and limitations by evaluating health problems and needs, as well as planning and implementing solutions that fill health gaps, in ways that directly address the needs expressed by citizens. It is important to note that community participation was already present in agricultural development projects and those aimed at poor urban suburbs in the 1950s and 1960s in Latin America,⁸ which represent an example of success and a reference in terms of strategy development and resilience.

Although the results of the activities

inherent to this participation and the benefits obtained are in favor of citizenship, the experiences and forms of organization are still ignored, so that when trying to implement projects based on the planning of international health organizations, with the purpose of benefiting communities with services of the same nature, these lack success since they face barriers of uses, customs and traditions of the community, characteristic features of rural areas, which mainly prevent the implementation of the strategies initially outlined.

To achieve effective and lasting participation, participation must become an integral and successful part of the common experience of the entire community and not remain a structure imposed from outside.⁹ For this to happen, common objectives must be shared with greater involvement and connection between members. In this situation, the leaders play a very important role, since there must be an understanding of the community, and of its traditions and customs. In contrast, when participation is overseen by agents external to the community, often with a culturally insensitive point of view, this tends to generate an obstacle in connecting with the community.

Because community participation is a strategy that involves the inhabitants of a specific geographical area in the procurement services for the benefit of current and future members of the same community, the absence of participation of all parties may imply a lower impact of the organized activities, the agility of the processes and the procurement of the required services.

Main limitations to the development of community participation

The absence, in some regions, of community participation could be linked to lack of trust towards political representatives, since authorities rarely consider the needs of areas outside the city (i.e., those less developed in comparison with the cities). Likewise, political representatives historically leave aside rural areas when making decisions that involve their entity. Hence, the lack of involvement of all the citizens of a community is the result of the visibility of the State and its representatives.

This is also pointed out by Menéndez¹⁰, who argues that participation is usually used as a

political strategy by representatives or future political representatives, where the visualization of citizens' needs is a tactic to benefit the representative and not the people. In this regard, the same author points out that "institutional power limits participation and turns it into an agent of reproduction of the dominant system"¹⁰, perpetuating vertical and bureaucratized participation, which results in the absence of citizen trust in governmental or international institutions.

In addition to the above, Ussher¹¹ points out that the relevance of total citizen participation represents the collective benefit from the reflection on the collective needs. Hence, the community's judgments and values are put in perspective to avoid the low collaboration of the community, so that the lack of participation refers to the omission of the needs of others, putting personal judgments first and disassociating from the unification of the community itself.

Given the above, the institutions that promote participatory processes should clarify what community participation is, since "participation" is sometimes confused with "collaboration", which refers to the participation of people in activities to help achieve goals, instead of generating another type of participation such as co-management that advocates for greater autonomy.¹²

For this reason, community work should be done with those who make up the community, to meet their needs, achieve the goals set and obtain the common benefit, based on communication, solidarity and transparency of the actions carried out by all members. In this way, government institutions can gain the trust of citizens and disassociate from the historical actions of some political representatives who only seek their own satisfaction. This, in turn, strengthens the actions of the population to obtain the services they need.

Also, as people become involved, they become empowered, which helps to mobilize community members to participate in decision making, implementation, monitoring and evaluation.¹³ This is a constant learning process, which aims to mobilize people to solve their needs and thus improve their environment and quality of life.

Participation as mobilization focuses on obtaining the direct participation of the population in development or health activities, that is, putting them in relation to power without the intervention of any intermediary. These actions can be collective or individual, as opposed to delegated participation in which the power of citizens to express themselves on their behalf is delegated to representatives. In this case, there may be situations of subjugation where authoritarianism predominates.

There is evidence of different community participation interventions in Europe and Latin America, in which communities reference the historical antecedents of their own community or country to confront the State and demand their needs be met. However, many examples have not been documented, which constitutes a disadvantage, since systematization contributes to obtaining new learning and serves as a reference to trace interventions from the examples. Due to this, there is little evidence linking participation with improvements in health,¹⁵ resulting in a barrier to the procurement of financing.

In general, the literature documenting experiences in community participation interventions is related to a type of collaborative participation. In the successful cases, there was greater cohesion and trust in the community, but many of them were not followed up. While successful interventions have been published, it is important that governments continue to encourage community participation as persistent challenges remain and the goal of "health for all" is still valid.

Conclusions

Public health services are basic services that should be provided by the State, but given the economic constraints faced by nations, especially those in the developing world, the implementation of such services is scarce, and to a greater extent in communities or rural areas, which are left outside of political strategies. Thus, community participation is key to make visible the needs that prevail in the region.

That is why community participation represents an affront from the communities and areas less sponsored by the government. Through this process, they denounce the absence of services

and raise their voice to demand those services that are a right. Hence, the development of activities inherent to community participation is of interest to the community itself, for the development of health services as a human right, and for the welfare of citizenship.

The creation of spaces that expose the absence of services that should be provided by the State is necessary this allows communities to unify their demands, thus developing a peaceful unified front to fulfill their needs.

Likewise, community participation generates inclusion in decision making through governance. This, in most of the documented cases, leads communities to obtain what they request, by breaking with the patterns of a passive and receptive society, resulting in empowerment through the defense of their rights.

To understand the needs of communities, it is necessary to open spaces for dialogue with political representatives, as well as meeting spaces and participatory processes, based on transparency. This will generate greater confidence and motivation for the development of community participation. It will also result in the avoidance of violent affronts, which are the result of the wear and tear of citizens caused by a chronic, long-term absence of necessary services and multiple failed political promises.

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