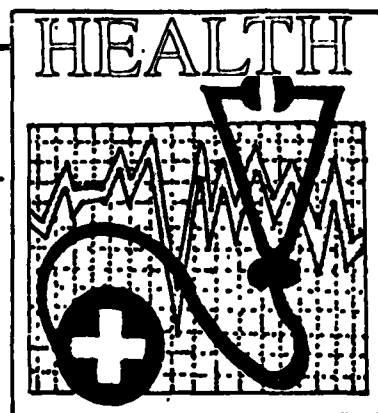


Role of NGOs in Health Care in Sri Lanka

by

Dr. Vinya Ariyaratne

Lecturer, Department of Community Medicine and Family Medicine,
Faculty of Medical Sciences, University of Sri Jayawardhanapura.



In Sri Lanka and elsewhere, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have been playing an important role in the field of development by concentrating on areas often neglected by government and academic institutions. In the health sector, NGOs have long been involved in the prevention and control of major diseases.

In Sri Lanka, due to the availability of an extensive health infrastructure, NGOs have not been involved directly in the *delivery* of health care. However, they have been effective in various important health-related activities such as nutrition, water supply and sanitation, HIV/AIDS prevention, health education and family planning.

Justification for NGO involvement in health care

Sri Lanka has completed two decades of operation of the free market economy, the aim of which is accelerated growth and "development". Despite whatever achievements on the economic front, there is still a significant section of the population who suffer from ill-health. There are several sub-groups such as the urban poor, the plantation population, communities living along the coastal belt, the displaced and the rural poor who are underserved by the health care system.

The social, economic and political changes that have taken place during the past two decades have permanently altered much of society and have significantly affected the health status of most people. In order to achieve economic growth often environmental and health standards have been compromised, resulting in the emergence of new public health problems. Thus, even before the country could come to grips

with more prevalent infectious diseases, it is faced with increasing incidence of diseases such as those related to stress, occupational hazards and poisoning. What is becoming clearer is that most health problems that we face today in our country are a result of more complex social and political phenomena. They have more to do with lifestyles, attitudes and values moulded by a consumerist social atmosphere. Any change in these can only be brought about by collective action, involving the community and through multisectoral effort. It is very clear from past experience that governments alone cannot do this.

Health status, as it is well recognised now, is the outcome of many societal influences, not just medical. Health problems and social problems are closely interlinked. People are constantly trapped in the vicious circle of poverty, malnutrition and disease. Hence, health care should be a matter for the people through their community based organisations assisted by all sectors; governmental, non-governmental and private. This implies a willingness on the part of the government authorities to cooperate with popular action viz-a-viz NGOs. There are many examples both in Sri Lanka and the world where such partnership has brought about significant results. Many NGOs in Sri Lanka have demonstrated new ways of working with low-income groups. The experience of the Sarvodaya Movement and similar initiatives in Sri Lanka support the fact that given the proper guidance and tools, the communities are capable of managing their own health problems.

NGOs are important in facilitating community participation in health development activities. This would, amongst other things, increase re-

sources available for health services, but more importantly, to think and act for themselves in all matters pertaining to their own health and well-being.

NGO action in health sector

The NGOs involved in health-related activities in Sri Lanka are many and diverse. Their involvement range from caring for those suffering from a specific disease (eg. SUROL in assisting leprosy patients, NEST - meeting the needs of AIDS patients) to advocacy to change government policy to attacking its causes with a view to prevention (eg. Sarvodaya). The NGOs deliberately direct their activities at underserved population, either rural or urban. Their focus of action may be mothers, children, youth or the community at large. The NGOs often obtain services of full-time or part-time professionals or volunteers to implement their health programmes.

The NGOs working in the health sector in Sri Lanka are active in the following areas :

- Mental health,
- Family planning/reproductive health,
- Water supply and sanitation,
- Prevention of drug addiction and alcoholism,
- Community based rehabilitation,
- Disaster relief,
- Environmental health,
- Occupational health and safety,
- STD/AIDS prevention, control and care,
- Nutrition,
- Child development,
- Care of the elderly and
- Health education

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There are approximately 150 national NGOs involved in health-related activities in Sri Lanka¹.

There are also a significant number of foreign NGOs (estimated at around 20 main foreign NGOs) involved in health-related activities in Sri Lanka. These include, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), CARE, Redd Barna, Medicins Sans Frontieres (MSF) and Save the Children Fund (SCF). Most of these organisations are active in the conflict areas providing essential relief and rehabilitation services, while assisting the government health services.

Future scenario for NGOs

With the dawn of the 21st Century the time has come for NGOs to develop new partnerships and define a new

role to address the health challenges of the new millennium. As Dr. Uton Rafei, the WHO's Regional Director for South Asia states: "If we are serious about meeting the challenges of our region, we cannot solely rely on our own efforts. We need to work with others, we need to form alliances and partnerships—partnerships for health"². WHO acknowledges that the role of NGOs has increased significantly over the past decade. Participation in, and strong visibility at international meetings including UN summits has fortified NGOs with increased recognition of the influence they wield and the usefulness of their contributions. Many are better equipped with technical skills and financial backing than previously. Their comparative edge over the public sector in flexibility, commitment and drive and sense of urgency for change, adds to their strengths.

While many partnerships between the public sector and NGOs have

worked well in the past, there still exists a love-hate relationship between the two, based on both dependency and suspicion. There is a need to recognise the compelling evidence that the two sectors are complementary and that by working together they can achieve much more than either can do alone. Dialogue must form the basis for developing trust, confidence and a more harmonious, genuine partnership. Sri Lanka is fortunate to have a very vibrant NGO community who are willing and responsive to meet the health challenges of the 21st century. ■

References:

1. A Pocket Directory of Organisations in Sri Lanka Working in the Fields of Primary Health Care and Women's Issues Relating to Health Status, Women's Development Centre, Kandy, 1995.
2. Uton Muchtar Rafei, Partnerships : A New Health Vision, WHO, New Delhi, 1997.