

A MODEL APPROACH TO VILLAGE LIFE IN TANZANIA

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Students from all around the world are experiencing the sharp end of health promotion at the Neema Village Concept Project in Tanzania. Anita Holford reports.

Pharmacy students from six different countries arrived in Kiromo, Tanzania, this May to assist in a four-year project which is helping villagers to play an active part in their own healthcare. The Neema Project is one of a number of village concept projects initiated in the early 1980s by the International Federation of Medical Students' Associations (IFMSA), but it is the first to be led by pharmacy students. Based on WHO Health for All principles (the IFMSA has official relations status with WHO), the aim is for local and foreign students to work together with small communities to improve the health status and living conditions of their population.

Kiromo is a small village, 80km north of Dar-Es-Salaam, the capital of Tanzania, and 10km away from the nearest dispensary in Bagamoyo. It's a typical Swahili village, with a scattered population and poor transport links. The journey to Dar-Es-Salaam takes two hours in a Land Rover on a dirt-track road - or four hours in a bus. There is one ambulance to serve the whole area.

Disease is common. Malaria, carried by mosquitoes from the nearby swampland, has affected all the families in the village at some time. In addition, sleeping sickness, pneumonia, diarrhoea and infections of the respiratory tract, eye, skin and lymph system are common. The situation is exacerbated by lack of knowledge about disease, poor diet and sanitation. So as well as providing a dispensary and healthcare services for 5,000 people in the Bagamoyo district, the project will also initiate health education campaigns for the 3,000 villagers in Kiromo.

'The main reason for choosing Kiromo was because the people in the village had been asking for a healthcare facility, but the government couldn't afford to build one,' explains Lindsay McClure, president of the International Pharmaceutical Students' Federation (IPSF is a worldwide organisation based in the Netherlands; the main student associations involved are as far afield as the UK, Canada and the United States.) '20Two students from the IPSF, one of whom was from nearby Dar-Es-Salaam University, recognised the need and proposed that the IPSF give support through a village concept project.

'Once this was agreed by the inhabitants and the IPSF, a village health committee was formed, as well as local and international coordinating groups, comprising student pharmacists' associations. Eventually, it is hoped that local agriculture and other students will be involved, in keeping with the interdisciplinary approach that WHO advocates.'

The Tanzanian government recognises the importance of health promotion, but there is little structural support. The Ministry of Health oversees the work of district medical officers, who are responsible for primary healthcare and run the district health centres and pharmacies. A healthcare assistant in each district travels to villages to administer vaccines and treat minor ailments, but is rarely able to reach everyone. The project secured official recognition through a protocol signed by the Ministry of Health, and the district medical officer maintains close contact.

By this spring, the pharmacy, mother and child healthcare centre and student accommodation had been built. (When the project ends in 2004, the pharmacy will become part of the Tanzanian healthcare system, managed by a rural medical aide.)

The next phase began with the arrival of the first group of students and recently qualified pharmacists in May. Groups will live in the village for three to six months on a rolling basis. Following a two-week initiation course, they provide a basic medical service and work with villagers to design and implement their own health promotion campaigns. There's a high illiteracy rate in the villages, so the main campaigns will be delivered through workshops, demonstrations, cartoon posters and other creative methods in homes, schools, churches, mosques and in the market.

Prior to the arrival of the students/start of the project a baseline questionnaire and a quality of life survey was carried out to gather information about perceived health needs from the heads of households in the village. This information will also provide a starting point for a future evaluation - the results will be collected by local students and the village health committee and then evaluated by students and professors, locally and in the US. This will be followed by a series of re-evaluations and follow-up research, including random questionnaires/surveys, observations by participants, and more thorough consultations with - and by - the target populations.

McClure adds: 'If the project has been successful, the villagers will have become fully involved: from promoting the health campaigns themselves, to helping to spread information and educate their peers. One of the major challenges of the project will be to inform as many people as possible about the workshops and health promotion activities, and to reach the target groups effectively. So the whole success of the project will depend on villagers taking ownership of the programmes and the initiative as a whole - and this will have implications not just for the four years of the project, but for the future.'

For more information, visit www.ipsf.org and look under 'Projects' for 'Neema Village Concept

Project’.

[box] Neema: How it all works

The international coordinating group (ICG) is ultimately responsible, but the villagers are the central focus. The local coordinating group (LCG), based in Dar-Es-Salaam, is responsible for visiting the village each week, and reporting back to the international group.

Villagers’ views are collected through regular meetings with the village health committee, local officials and villagers. So the main work, ideas and initiatives have - and will - come from the participants, staff and villagers working together.

Members of the Board of Pharmacy and professors at the local university are also involved, and organisations such as Management Sciences for Health and Pharmaciens Sans Frontiers are consulted when appropriate.

[box] The village concept

The village concept is a development project in rural villages that lasts for some years. It:

- Originates from the felt needs of the inhabitants, who actively participate in all aspects of the project
- Adopts an interdisciplinary approach dealing with health, agriculture, education, economy and other aspects of daily life, and involves students from each of these sectors
- Requires professional supervision from experts in governmental and non-governmental agencies.