Rapid Assessment Procedures in Environmental Sanitation Research

A Case Study from the Northern Border of Mexico

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ABSTRACT

Background: There is a need to enhance the quality and sustainability of environmental health programs in Mexico. What socio-cultural factors influenced the adoption or rejection of Clean Water in Homes programs in this population? We applied rapid appraisal procedures (RAP) to evaluate these community-based programs.

Method: Qualitative study conducted in communities along Mexico’s northern border. We conducted informal dialogues, semi-structured interviews, field notes and observations. Home visits used a checklist to observe: sources of water, handwashing, as well as human waste and garbage disposal patterns.

Data analysis was conducted using ATLAS.ti, which facilitated comparison and illustration of discrepancies, the elaboration of emerging issues and relationships between them.

Results: Community members perceived that the Clean Water program was a top-down intervention. Water is perceived as a political issue and a matter of corruption. Inequity also limits solidarity activities involved in environmental sanitation. Migration to the United States of America (US) contributes to community fragmentation, which in turn dilutes communal efforts to improve water and sanitation infrastructure. While targeting women as program “recipients”, the Clean Water program did not take gendered spheres of decision-making into account. Community members and authorities discussed the main results in “assemblies”, particularly addressing the needs of excluded groups.

Conclusion: The oversight of not exploring community members’ needs and priorities prior to program implementation resulted in interventions that did not address the structural (economic, infrastructure) and socio-cultural barriers faced by community members to undertake the health-promoting behaviour change, and provoked resentment.

MeSH terms: Water and sanitation; Mexico-US border; qualitative research methods

La traduction du résumé se trouve à la fin de l’article.

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the efficacy of future community-based environmental interventions. RAP was selected as the most appropriate and affordable method of data collection to answer the following question: What socio-cultural factors influenced the adoption or rejection of PALC-related activities in these communities?

**POPULATION AND METHODS**

Two thirds of adult women from both the intervention community and control group are economically active, since most men between the ages of 15 and 45 years have migrated to the United States. Enteric and respiratory infections are the most frequent cause of disease among children, and official records suggest that up to 50% of residents rely on latrines and septic tanks. Review of the health services records revealed that diarrhea is the most frequent reason for seeking a medical visit.

Five field workers were trained by experienced anthropologists during an intensive workshop. RAP research techniques were adapted from guidelines developed by Scrimshaw and Hurtado, the International Water and Sanitation Centre and Almedon et al., and tested in the field (Table I). Data collection methods included:

- **Informal dialogues** with five community leaders and three local authorities, identified during the pilot procedures. Dialogues were conducted following an outline of major concerns and information on principal environmental health issues and perceptions with regard to PALC.
- **Field notes, systematic walk-about, and observation.** We recorded village layouts, water infrastructure, sewers and marginal compounds (mapping). Diagrams and field notes were used to illustrate the relationships among different groups and individuals most affected by water and sanitation deficiencies.
- **Semi-structured interviews.** A total of 24 individuals were identified from informal dialogues and interviewed. We gathered testimonies about the main health concerns, as well as attitudes and practices related to water collection, disposal of human waste, and hygiene practices.
- **Focus group discussions.** The objective was to assess community perception of PALC and identify priority concerns. Every group discussion (n=5) involved 8-10 individuals aged 15-65 years, mostly females with different education levels.

**RESULTS**

**Ojinaga (peri-urban homesteads)**

According to official records, the municipal water system provides 96% of the population with potable water; home visits revealed, however, that such coverage is considerably lower (below 50%). Drinking water comes from five deep wells fed by the Rio Conchos and by a tributary of the Rio Bravo. Almost every family has a water tap in their yard. While some individuals consider the tap water safe to drink, most informants boil drinking water, treat it with water disinfection or purchase bottled water.

**El Mezquite (rural)**

Drinking water is obtained from a spring using hoses. Water shortages affect more than half of visited homes. There is no public sewage system. Latrines and open pits are used or some people, particularly children, defecate on the ground. Physical and economic barriers prevent the other half of the population from using the municipal sewage services. Connecting houses on steep inclines (up to 7 metres) to the sewage system is a costly engineering challenge. Consequently, half of the population uses latrines and septic tanks, some of which are now filled to capacity. Urban wastewater is transported to drying fields, whereas peri-urban sewage is disposed of on the banks of both rivers.

**Barriers to implementation of water, sanitation and hygiene programs**

**Politics, PALC and Community Participation**

Water is a political issue along the border, and is perceived as such by community members: “The local authorities should pay attention to these problems, it would be

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cheaper…but they always say that there are no resources [but] as you can see, in Ojinaga they are going to build a new water network for the city, forgetting about the families of El Mezquite. There is corruption and the political parties are always fighting each other. They forget about what they should do for the people that vote for them.” (Testimony (T)3.1/El Mezquite). Community members perceived that the Clean Water in Homes program was a top-down intervention and a discouraging approach for community participation. As a key informant said: “No one told us about this program ahead of time. One day some people came to ask a lot of questions and to invite us to meetings…many of us had doubts, and some people were even distrustful.” (T1.1/Ojinaga). “It’s always the same. Politicians come and go, promising potable water and services; but as you can see…” (T2.1/Ojinaga). They don’t take us into account and that is why the people don’t trust them…We would like to participate, before they start implementing these programs; we could tell them what we need here.

Infrastructure and Economic Barriers
Explosive growth of colonies and compounds has resulted in overcrowding and poor sanitation. Poor municipal infrastructure and financial constraints limit access to water: “We have water irregularly. During the dry season it doesn’t come for up to a week. Before, almost all of the houses had a cistern; now, the rooms that people hardly ever have a decent bathroom.” (T3.2/El Mezquite). The cost of accessing alternative water sources was prohibitive for many participants: “In my house, we have to buy water from the water trucks, but it’s very expensive to fill the water tank.” (T4.2/El Mezquite).

The Clean Water in Homes intervention addressed “safe” water shortage by providing disinfectant (i.e., colloidal silver). Women said: “the support that they [PALC] give us is good, while they keep on giving us colloidal silver, we’ll use it, but if they don’t give it to us, we can’t obtain it because of lack of money.” (T4.3/El Mezquite). “When this program is over we will forget about it. PALC has not promoted alternatives…”. (T5.3/El Mezquite).

The gap between the conditions assumed by PALC and the living conditions in the communities where the intervention was implemented, and the consequent failure to implement health-promoting behaviours, were summarized by this community member: “It is of no use that they tell you how to live with fewer diseases…Who wouldn’t want to live in a better place, with services that take care of the garbage, and not have the hassle of getting water? Who believes we are here because we like it?” (T4.1/Ojinaga). In general, the most serious hygiene problems were identified in the poorest households, most of which were also the most apathetic about the Clean Water in Homes program.

Mobility and Community Fragmentation
As well as being excluded from public health services, this population is highly mobile. In El Mezquite, more than 20% of homes were empty, due to the migration of entire families to the United States. A similar situation was observed in peri-urban compounds from Ojinaga. Walkabouts revealed a series of homesteads that function merely as dormitories without water or toilets. Informal interviews corroborated these observations: “In some neighborhoods, families only stay a short time, and when they leave, the house remains empty until others come…we don’t know who lives or lived there…”. (T5.2/Ojinaga). Migration contributes to community fragmentation, which in turn dilutes communal efforts to improve infrastructure. One individual who was making efforts to take responsibility for his garbage pointed out a mound of garbage under a lightpost a few metres from his home and stated: “The neighbors bring their waste and leave it there; there is no [garbage] collection. We burn the garbage here [indicating a corner of the backyard] but as you can see…it isn’t very useful.” (T5.2/El Mezquite). Differential access to economic resources and infrastructure also limited collaboration between neighbours: “Those of us that have drainage don’t worry about others. If you walk over there [indicates the outskirts] and look just a little, you will see that the streams are full of garbage and sewage.” (T5.3/El Mezquite).

Mobility and the Gendered Division of Labour
A high proportion of women increasingly assume the role of the primary breadwinner, as males migrate to the United States: “Men go to the other side (US), and sometimes they are slow in coming back. My husband left 6 months ago and we haven’t heard anything from him. Sometimes he sends money; we have to organize ourselves to get ahead.” (T6.2/Ojinaga). Both daily workload and lack of economic resources are barriers to exploring better options for maintaining hygiene, and accessing and protecting water. During focus groups and interviews, women reported keeping drinking water in protected jars, but on-site observation revealed that water was commonly stored in unprotected containers, which were seldom washed. During interviews, informants pointed out: “We have a lot to do [housework]; we hardly ever wash [buckets and barrels].” (T7.1/El Mezquite).

Women’s overwork emerges in most collected data. Younger females are delegated several household tasks. These girls have limited concepts of hygiene, sanitation and health; thus, additional risk may result if young girls conduct the role of “guardian of the house”. On the other hand, as most testimonies revealed, women are often excluded from the consultation, planning and training stages of water-related construction projects – such as the building of sewers – as these are considered to be exclusively part of the men’s domain. While targeting women as program recipients, PALC did not take gendered spheres of decision-making into account.

The assembly process promoted during the rapid assessment procedures permitted women to reflect on this gendered division of responsibility and begin to demand a voice in decisions about water and sanitation issues: “Men have also to learn to take joint decisions, although we (women) have had to fight hard and put a lot of pressure in order to be taken into account.”

**DISCUSSION**

This study was conducted to shed light on socio-cultural and structural barriers to the implementation of the behavioural changes involved in environmental health projects. Rapid assessment procedures (RAP), as employed here, revealed that the relationship between PALC implementers and community members was fraught with problems from the outset because of the top-down process – which is reminiscent of one-size-fits-all programs – as well as
political promises that have been of little benefit to these excluded populations. Community members stated that they could have provided important input regarding their priorities and taken a more proactive role in program implementation had they been consulted. The preceding points to the importance of participatory methodologies, not simply for providing a better understanding of the local realities that can impinge on program development, but for the potential of harnessing the energies of the community to reach program goals. Issues addressed in this investigation focussed on the limited demand-driven approach while planning and implementing environmental interventions.

Indeed, RAP techniques revealed emerging socio-economic and cultural conditions that made implementation and sustainability of the PALC initiative difficult in these communities. The focus on health-promoting behaviours, rather than on the structural conditions that facilitate or impede behaviours to limit enteric disease (access to water, time available to carry out domestic tasks), was identified as a central weakness of the program. These observations suggest that earlier participation by the users may help to design more effective environmental interventions.

Rapid identification of major variables (e.g., water insecurity, mobilization, gender roles) during initial procedures helped to open up the debate at assemblies to identify and compare perception and opinions. The information collected using RAP thereby entered into a feedback loop which was expected to contribute to improving future environmental health interventions.15

One of the successes of the Clean Water in Homes program was in increasing the consumption of disinfected drinking water. Unfortunately, RAP identified that many community members had little intention to continue purchasing colloidal silver after the program ended. The economic barriers were quickly identified through the RAP methodology, which revealed that PALC did not achieve positive change regarding human waste disposal or handwashing. The detailed description of living conditions, daily living activities and perceptions of community members suggests that mobility, poverty, and gender inequities were all barriers to adoption of the behaviours promoted by PALC. The methods and results from this investigation provided the opportunity for community members to discuss PALC and share their views about the feasibility of future interventions in public assemblies. By encouraging women’s participation in assemblies and planning meetings, RAP increased their abilities to influence future policies.

CONCLUSION

The oversight of not exploring community members’ needs and priorities prior to program implementation resulted in interventions that did not address the structural (economic, infrastructure) and socio-cultural barriers faced by community members to undertake the health-promoting behaviour change, and provoked resentment.

This case study represents a window of opportunity for convincing policy-makers and donors of the need for conducting this groundwork before launching large-scale projects. Participatory methods show that individuals and communities, when actively involved in evaluation and planning, can take control of the process and empower themselves to make significant changes.

Indeed, more appropriate behaviour-oriented interventions and affordable solutions emerge from the process. The result is a more direct, more sustainable and affordable planning program that heightens its potential impact through iterative re-evaluation and community support. Thus, the core of new pilot projects may consist in supporting achievable behaviour changes and cost-effective environmental health programs.

REFERENCES


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