



Local Government to Support Community Management of Environmental Health in Benin

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Community Management of Environmental Health known as GESCOME (Gestion Communautaire de Santé Environnementale) was a multiyear activity implemented by EHP in Benin. From September 1999 through May 2002, EHP worked with USAID/Benin to optimize decentralized decision-making related to diarrheal disease prevention in selected medium-sized towns. The activity, which engaged citizens and government in local communities, resulted in the provision under well-structured management of much wanted and needed public latrines and water points. Additionally, participatory community health communication—an innovative approach to cooperative learning by community and public health personnel—ensured proper use of latrines with reduced open air defecation and led to improved hygiene behavior such as handwashing after latrine use, covering food, covering water jars and increased general cleanliness of the environment. There was also a change in the understanding of causes of diarrhea and an increase in participatory decision making, cooperation between local government and citizens, and solution finding related to health problems.

The GESCOME Approach

The Benin GESCOME approach was an effective instrument for stimulating community changes in health understanding and health practices as well as building and maintaining physical infrastructure (hardware) for diarrheal disease prevention in rural towns.

The approach:

- Combined participatory problem identification and analysis, solution finding

and health communication with a good governance component

- Stressed coalition building between local government, civil society and communities.



Banikoara, Benin. Note the covered food containers and well swept courtyard, which the women agreed are important for diarrheal disease prevention.

Benefits

GESCOME has:

- Enabled local communities to generate and communicate vital health information rapidly by relying on the community's own modes of generating and transmitting knowledge through "natural" groups
- Ensured that many different groups that reflect multiple sectors of the local society were included in all aspects of the participatory GESCOME process
- Built broad support and trust among local administrative officials, technical service agents, civil society leaders and communities



to mobilize resources to construct and maintain latrines and water resource points

- Given local communities a strong sense of ownership by giving them full responsibility to choose and manage their micro-projects
- Provided appropriate low-cost technologies that are easily managed by people with relatively little formal education.

Decision Making in GESCOME

GESCOME was designed to include respect for local context and knowledge and emphasized the importance of local level decision making.

Key elements in the decision-making structures included:

- Effective linking of community groups (e.g., non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and women's groups) and informal neighborhood "natural" groups (e.g., neighbors using the same water source) with local elected officials (*chefs de quartier* and mayors), municipal/commune-level government and the departmental administration¹
- Delegation of decision-making powers to local communities to organize and manage, as they saw fit, the micro-projects they chose
- Establishment, application and enforcement of rules that were designed to ensure transparency and accountability.

Key Elements for Scaling Up

The GESCOME approach may be scaled up to an entire region or country. Key elements in the successful scale-up process are:

- Begin on a small-scale with three to five towns to test and adapt the approach under

new local conditions and learn from the process

- Select enthusiastic, talented participants in the GESCOME process to be trainers and train them to train participants in other towns/regions
- Build on and contribute to the synergistic effect with other actors in environmental health
- Ensure that institutions and communities are linked at all levels, from neighborhoods to the highest level of government at the largest unit of scale (e.g., if scale up is national, links should encompass all levels, including national government)
- Maintain maximum flexibility, participation and ownership in the neighborhoods and towns
- Ensure that all participants understand that decision making is decentralized and autonomous; consequently, GESCOME structures will vary by neighborhood
- Maintain a management policy based on facilitation and mentoring to completely support the finding of local solutions to problems
- Create an esprit de corps, which encourages collaboration and knowledge sharing among the staff, rather than developing project bureaucracy with a large office.

A report documenting lessons learned from the GESCOME experience is available from EHP. For more information or to request a copy, please email: info@ehproject.org

The full report can also be downloaded from the EHP website www.ehproject.org

¹ In Benin, the "department" is the administration unit immediately below the region and above the commune.