

## LISTENING TO COMMUNITIES TO BUILD RELATIONSHIPS & DEVELOP RELEVANT PROGRAMS: A TWO-STEP PARTICIPATORY METHODOLOGY

Experience has shown that community involvement helps ensure that program strategies relate to the needs of community members and that it contributes to greater community commitment to development programs. Key considerations related to community involvement include: who is involved, how and when? Programs sometimes involve community members once program activities have been fully defined by program staff. Often programs involve younger members of the society and do not explicitly involve elders who, in virtually all non-western societies play an important role as advisors to younger generations.

Grandmother Project (GMP) has developed an innovative, two-step approach to actively involve younger and older community members of both sexes, at the formative stage of program development. The first step consists of a rapid, participatory community assessment. The second step involves facilitated dialogue between generations. Both steps allow community members to express their ideas and allow development workers to better understand community values, roles and assets.

**Step I: Participatory community assessment** -> all key community groups share opinions on family member roles, attitudes and practices related to topic/s of interest. Unique assessment characteristics are: 1) information is collected on family member roles, influence & decision-making, and in addition, on their knowledge & practices; 2) both community assets, or resources, and problems are analyzed.

**Step II: Intergenerational (IG) dialogue**->The second step is to elicit dialogue between key community groups of older & younger, men & women, on identified problems. GMP developed an innovative approach, the *intergenerational (IG) forum*, in which issues are debated within and between peer groups of different ages and sexes. The main aim of the IG forums is to seek consensus on priority problems related to the well-being of children, women & families, on the roots of those problems and on how to solve them.

The IG forums reflect the three central principles of GMP: 1) inclusion of elders, and specifically grandmothers; 2) strengthening intergenerational (IG) communication and learning; and 3) use of communication and education methods focused on dialogue and problem-solving rather than on message dissemination.

Unique characteristics of the IG forums are: 1) opinions of both elders and young adults, men and women are elicited and respected; 2) facilitators encourage community members to discuss both existing and new ideas and to decide if and how they can be combined; 3) equal attention is given to strengthening positive cultural traditions and to re-examining less beneficial ones.



*"There is often a barrier because different segments of society don't talk openly with each other. But in the IG forums men and women, of different ages and of different social classes are together. People listen to each other and share ideas. In this way we can solve our problems."*

Mamadou Alpha Mballo, an elder, Senegal

In one of the IG forums in Mauritania a teacher stated: "We were sitting with the community and listening to them. It was a wonderful experience and it helped us to become closer to the parents and the elders."

This two-step approach has been very successfully used in several countries to address different issues: maternal & child nutrition/health in Mali with HKI; child nutrition in Djibouti with UNICEF; early marriage & female genital mutilation in Senegal with World Vision; education & child protection in Mauritania with World Vision. The generic two-step participatory methodology can be adapted to address any development issue at the community level.

### Positive outcomes of the two-step process

- ◆ Increased respect for elders and realization of the importance of actively involving them in community programs
- ◆ Increased recognition of grandmothers' role in promoting child and family well-being
- ◆ Increased willingness of elders to listen to young people's opinions
- ◆ Identification of community values & resources to be preserved & strengthened
- ◆ Stronger relationships between community members & staff of development organizations

The two-step approach builds relationships within communities & also between communities & development workers. These relationships are the basis for collaborative action to address priority community needs immediately and in the future.

