Collaborating with Non-Profit Organizations to Implement Public Health Initiatives: A Case Study on Rural Africa

Natalie Stevens, stevens.natalie7@gmail.com, and Quinn Galbraith describe a unique partnership between public health students, local healthcare professionals, and non-profit organizations making a meaningful impact



Members of the community participating receiving a health talk

In the heart of rural Uganda, a unique partnership between public health students, local healthcare professionals, and non-profit organizations makes a meaningful impact. By combining essential health education with a free eye care clinic, this initiative addresses important health challenges while equipping individuals with knowledge to improve their long-term well-being.

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Addressing Critical Health Needs

Uganda faces a significant burden of diseases, including malaria, hygiene-related illnesses, and sexually transmitted infections. In 2022 alone, the World Health Organization reported 12.7 million malaria cases and over 17,556 related deaths in the country. Additionally, UNAIDS estimates that approximately 570 young women aged 15 to 24 contract HIV each week in Uganda. As a low-resource nation with pressing health challenges, Uganda receives substantial global philanthropic support, with hundreds of NGOs working there each year to provide essential services related to basic health, eye, and dental care.

However, delivering effective health education in these settings presents challenges. Traditional lecture-based approaches are limited in their effectiveness because they often fail to engage busy community members or there is lack of education available. Recognizing this, our initiative

integrated health education with a free eye care service, ensuring strong community participation while addressing multiple health needs simultaneously.

An Innovative Approach to Public Health Education

Public Health students Lola Obalana and Natalie Stevens collaborated with Samuel Mugaya, a Ugandan nursing instructor and founder of the nonprofit Rosbren Health Clinic, to identify key health topics and develop culturally applicable lessons. Relevant topics were narrowed down to hygiene, fitness and nutrition, first aid, sexual health, women's health, malaria, marriage and family planning. These lessons would be taught at a community event hosted by Mugaya.

In October 2023, Mugaya hosted Eagle Vision Worldwide, a U.S.-based nonprofit specializing in eye care, along with the Public Health students at his clinic in Busunju, Uganda. Hundreds of people came for a free eye exam and the opportunity of receiving prescription eyeglasses. Rather than waiting in a line, people received a number, allowing them to sit beneath tents and participate in the lessons. One participant noted that, "the people were able to relax and have fun with the teachers because they weren't so worried about getting skipped in line or being missed by the doctor." The Public Health students, with Ugandan nursing students translating, taught nine health lessons. Each lesson lasted about 15 minutes and involved audience participation and activities. This served as educational entertainment for the families who had to wait 3-5 hours to see the doctor.

Community Engagement and Health Impact

The initiative made an impact beyond the people it directly served. Public health experts observed that once one person received valuable information, they shared it with family and neighbors, multiplying the benefits. First aid and family planning generated the most discussion, highlighting how important these topics are to the community. However, even the most basic topics like hygiene can have a large impact on health and a ripple effect in the community. For example, a study by Pengpid and Peltzer found that only 35% of individuals in African countries wash their hands with soap. Educating children and adults on basic hygiene practices can significantly reduce diarrheal diseases, a leading cause of child mortality in Uganda.

Collaboration for Sustainable Change

This initiative exemplifies the power of multi-sector collaboration in improving public health. The synergy between public health educators, local health workers, and non-profit organizations leveraged the strengths of each partner and worked to ensure thorough service delivery. By integrating education with medical care, the project demonstrated an effective model for engaging communities and addressing health concerns. Local health workers like Mugaya and his nursing students played an important role in bridging the gap between foreign organizations and the local community, helping to translate medical knowledge into culturally relevant guidance. The teamwork between these groups created a sustainable model for addressing rural health disparities, demonstrating how strategic partnerships can improve healthcare delivery in resource-limited settings.



Members of the community waiting for services

Looking ahead, this model can be replicated in other regions with similar health challenges. We invite other non-profit organizations to partner with public health educators. These partnerships can amplify the benefits of international health efforts. In many underserved areas, long wait times are unavoidable when only a few doctors assist hundreds in need of free care. While providing free medical services is essential, health education is a simple addition that creates a lasting impact. By equipping individuals with knowledge and resources, this method not only improves immediate health conditions but also fosters long-term health and empowerment. With continued support and expansion, initiatives like this can serve as a blueprint for addressing global health disparities and ensuring that every individual has access to essential health education and services.

Video covering the event: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aR8mo98srjw&feature=youtu.be

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