

Theme: Cutting Edge Research (F) Complexity science and people centred systems

Title: The VOICES initiative to strengthen Village Health Committees in two Indian states: findings of implementation research

Introduction: India's 480,000 VHCs are crucial platforms for community engagement for health. Under the National Rural Health Mission, VHCs have been envisaged as local participatory bodies bringing frontline workers, local elected officials and community members together for planning, delivery and monitoring of health services. VHCs require strengthening through enabling institutional mechanisms and environments to realise the goal of better health action at community level.

Methods: The findings reported are from the first phase of implementation research on an institutional support package to enhance community engagement in 100 villages in Rajasthan and Tamil Nadu. Research methods are primarily qualitative and draws on actor-centred implementation analysis. Data was collected through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, observation and documentation of organisational processes and review of selected indicators on process and outcomes. Analysis follows the 'framework' approach, combining inductive and deductive process.

Results: Study findings demonstrate the influence of policy and social contexts in determining the pathways and mechanisms for intensified community engagement. In Tamil Nadu, with a more hierarchical health systems, committees faced challenge from reflecting purely system priorities to becoming fora for articulating community voice and playing a larger social role moving beyond monitoring of a narrow package of core health services. Rajasthan, while having a policy environment more open to community engagement, faced hindrances from the social context of status of women and marginalised communities.

Discussion: VHCs in both states require institutional support to understand their roles and responsibilities, and to function as institutions that are truly representative of communities and their interests. The pathways to strengthening them varies due to the health system and social contexts they are embedded in. The study contributes to new knowledge on community engagement by VHCs, and provide valuable comparative perspectives and evidence for scaling up institutional support for VHCs across geographies.