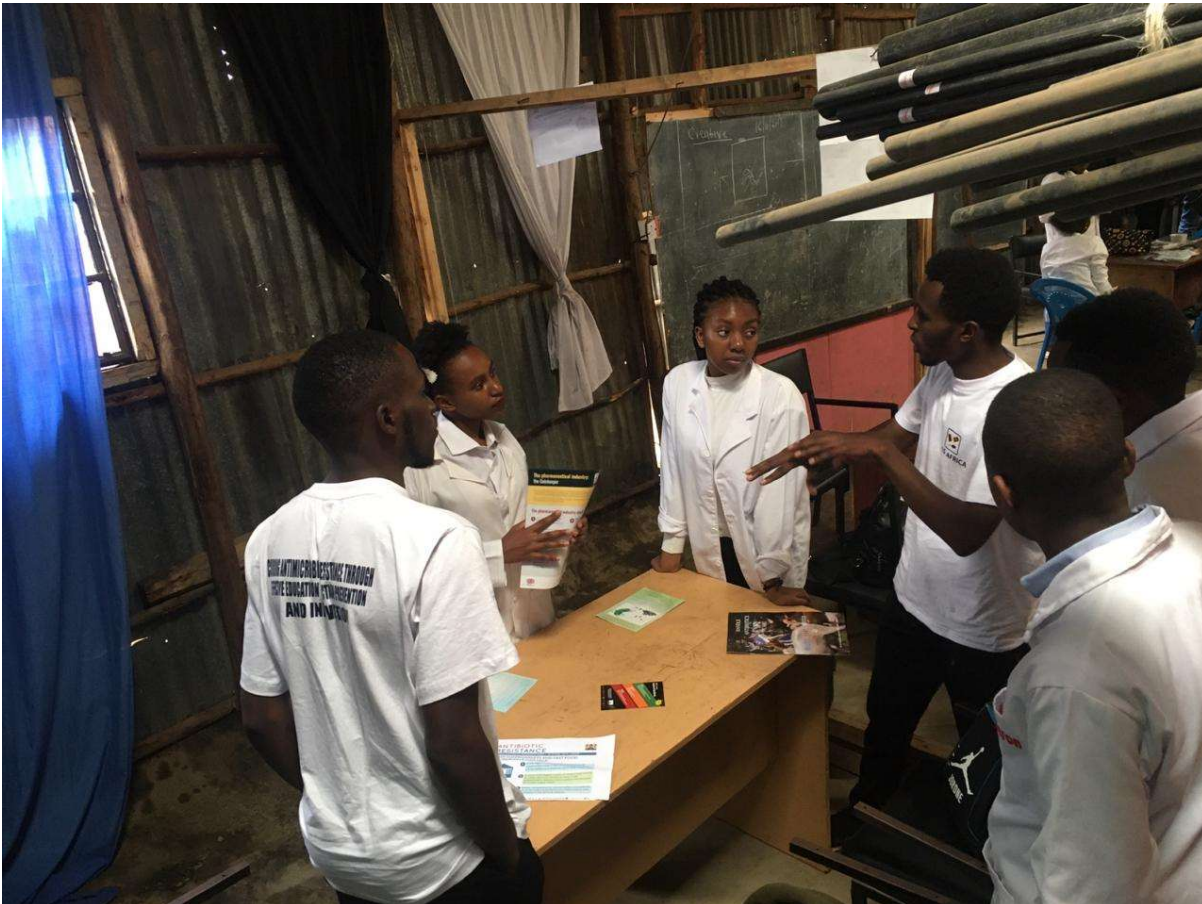**Developing A Community Centered Approach in Public Health Advocacy: Utilizing Existing Community and Social Groups, 'Chamas,' in Nairobi Urban Informal Settlements in Kenya**

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Summary

Poverty not only alienates people from the benefits of health care systems but also prevents them from participating in decision making which contributes to their overall health. People living in the urban informal settlements are prone to more health inequalities due to poor provision of health and social services[i]. Most of the solutions developed are spearheaded by foreign bodies' and have inadequate community participation. Despite their disadvantaged economic situation, many have the potential to develop and implement development-conscious initiatives[ii]. This can be manifested by the existence of social groups initiated by the locals. These groups operate as savings' structures, pooled investment platforms, and offer credit facilities to

their members[iii]. They are locally known as "chamas." These "chamas" can be united under one umbrella to advocate for better health and social services in the slums with the assistance of "influencers" and mainstream media.

Story

Most projects in the slums fail due to the application of standard top-down programs where local realities do not fit[iv]. Residents are rarely involved in the formulation of health care policies and in decision making. This contradicts with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16 which advocates for effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions. Residents are believed to be too ignorant to effectively set up their own development priorities. Many community projects have stalled due to lack of sustainability. As a result, urban informal settlements continue to face many public health challenges arising from the scarcity of essential social services and dilapidated health care facilities.[v] Most of these facilities are privately owned and do not meet the minimum operating guidelines. Currently, there are very few government and development agencies' projects that have been initiated as a result of past failures.

The slum residents have proven to be knowledgeable and intelligent by establishing their own self-development initiatives designed as "chamas" (social groups). These are fragmented, highly organized groups for saving, lending, and borrowing money[vi]. They are also used for engaging in pooled investments. They have become powerhouses for social capital in the informal settlements. Rarely documented, these initiatives operate independently and are very are sustainable[vii]. This project illustrates how the "chamas" in a particular settlement can be pooled together to advocate for better health care resources and the provision of basic social amenities. Women are highly involved in these groups.

This project involves identification of social groups in a specific settlement. The members will be enlightened on the existing health challenges and empowered to be part of the solution. A memorandum of understanding will be forged with the groups that agree to join in the project. The different groups will be pooled together under a created umbrella advocacy organization. The different groups will still get to go about their specific activities and be empowered to be more effective.

The next phase involves sourcing for "influencers." These influential people can be from the community or from other areas but with keen interest and experience in the development of slums. They should be able to blend well with government and institutional heads and be well endowed with corporate skills to lobby for the provision of essential services in the settlements. This will be a voluntary role.

The last phase will be sourcing for partnerships among mainstream media companies to support the project. The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) lists mainstream media as a social accountability machine[viii]. It has the mandate to inform, educate, publicize, and advocate. The media outlets will be responsible for offering constant visibility on the challenges facing urban informal settlements. This will attract public attention and be a necessary catalyst in pressurizing the government into action.

The umbrella organization will have a mutually agreed upon constitution to guide its operational structure. It also will have a well formulated management structure sourced from the local residents. It will be comprised of an executive committee with representation from all the social groups. The executive committee will elect a steering group among themselves. These members will be responsible for the day to day running of the

umbrella organization for a two-year period. They will undergo the relevant training and the organization will also have committees that will be expected to participate in the implementation of the projects initiated.

There will be periodical public gatherings to improve community participation on an as needed analysis. This way, the community will be responsible for identifying their problems, prioritizing them, and developing their own interventions. This will ensure greater efficiency, accountability, transparency, enhanced service delivery, and better outcomes in the programs developed.

This project is expected to improve the public health conditions of the urban informal settlements. It will be evaluated quarterly through key performance indicators selected through community participation. The project will deploy routine data collection, data aggregation, and data analytics to measure the outcomes of the project. Annual reports will be shared with the members. Community report cards such as suggestion boxes and feedback forms will be offered periodically. After three years, a comparative study will be conducted to assess the impact of the project.

The financing model adopted reduces reliance on external organizations and focuses on the contributions received from the social groups. Most of the roles are conducted through volunteerism which minimizes operational costs. The umbrella organization will also lobby for funding from local institutions. The project will seek support among impact investors and other organizations willing to offer suitable savings and credit services to the social group's members. The institutions will fund the project as part of its corporate social responsibility initiative. Other interested organizations will also be invited to fund and offer expertise on running the projects.

The success of the initial project will determine its simulation to other informal settlements. This will be after the completion of the first annual monitoring and evaluation phase. As per the findings, the program will be replicated in other slums. The provision of essential services such as access to clean water, drainage, and waste management systems, safe and nutritious foods, and sufficient living space is expected to improve. The residents will also be empowered with management and financial literacy. The project aims at redesigning local perceptions and revealing to local residents the great potential that they possess.

Social accountability and advocacy forums have been initiated previously in the informal settlements. However, most of them are driven by organizations alien to these slums[ix]. In many situations, the locals are rarely consulted. Many of these projects become stalled once donor funds are depleted. By placing the community at the center of its operation, this project is more sustainable. The project also optimizes on local knowledge, increases project acceptability, promotes mobilization of local resources, and improved equitable distribution of resources.

From a social-political context, the implementation can be impacted by social obstacles such as the dependency mentality, domination by the local elite, gender inequality, and ethnic differences. However, the utilization of social groups undercuts most of these challenges. Many of the social groups are also headed by women which will improve gender representation. Continuous training and engagement are expected to amplify these qualities and diminish the negative social structures that may be present. Power relations and politics are also expected to arise in terms of who takes control of the organizations.

Conclusion

This project places community engagement at the center of its operation. Increased community participation in the past has been attributed to better designed projects and targeted benefits, more equitable distribution, more cost-effective projects, and reduced corruption. It is expected to shift the paradigm from external influence and will reveal to the community members their immense potential, as well strengthen their capability of undertaking other self-initiated development projects in the future.

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