

Community participation in health - the Tamboville Health Committee.

by Critical Health

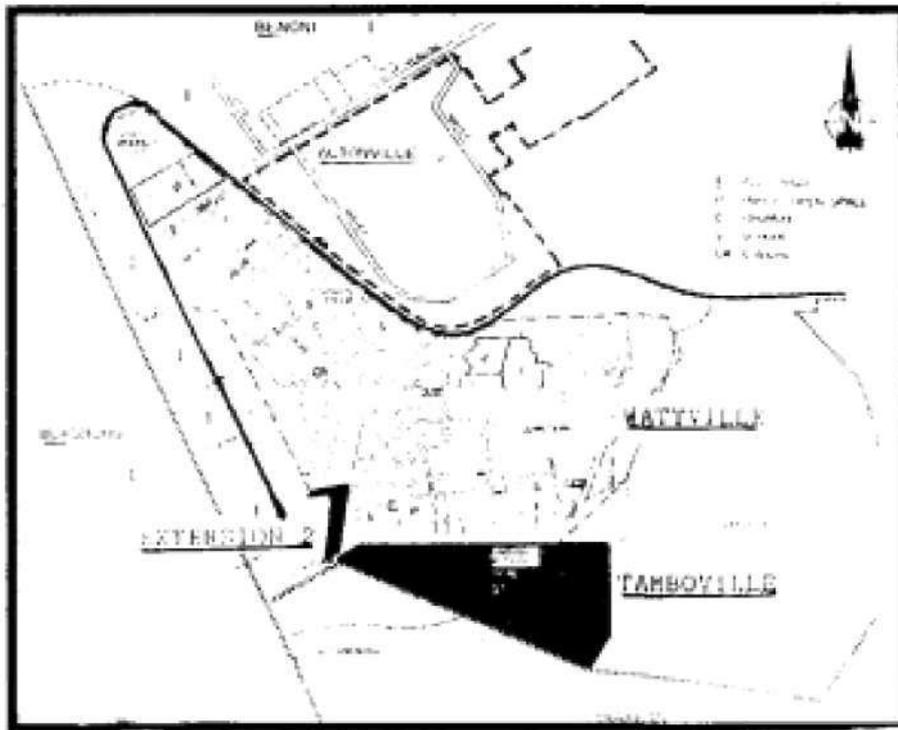
In the past community organisations in South Africa have not given much attention to the issue of health. It has been argued, however, that community participation in health services is a requirement if there is to be a genuine improvement in people's health. How community participation in health is to be achieved is, however, not clear and there are some who say that it is not really practically possible.

This article looks at the establishment of Tamboville, a low cost housing settlement, by residents of the township of Wattville. It focuses on the formation of the Tamboville health committee and looks at some of the problems facing the committee. The article provides a motivation for community participation in health. It concludes with a proposal aimed at defining more clearly the role of the health committee in encouraging community participation in health.

The struggle for land, housing, and health in Tamboville

Wattville and Tamboville

On a boot shaped piece of land bordered on three sides by the "white" towns of Benoni, Boksburg, and Brakpan lies the township of Wattville. Wattville is a typical



Location of Wattville & Tamboville (courtesy Planact)

South African township. There is widespread poverty and unemployment, and a shortage of land, housing and health facilities. But in certain respects Wattville is fairly unique. For one thing the crime rate is relatively low. Unlike many other South African townships, most of the people who stay in Wattville have been staying there for more than 10 years. Also in Wattville there are more adults (over 18) than children (under 18) while in most South African townships it is the other way round.

Running along the south side of Wattville lies another smaller piece of land which until quite recently was open veld. In June 1990 the community of Wattville, under the leadership of the Wattville Concerned Residents Committee (WCRC), decided to occupy this area which is owned by the Benoni Town Council (BTC). The land invasion was carried out in a planned and orderly manner. Numbered plots were laid out and these were each allocated to a family from within Wattville. The invaded land was named Tamboville after the national chairperson of the ANC and former resident of Wattville, Oliver Tambo.

The main motivation for the land invasion was the land and housing shortage in the township. A recent survey of the housing situation in Wattville has revealed that over 40% of stands in Wattville have at least 1 outbuilding, while 17% have 3 outbuildings. On average there are more than 7 people inhabiting each of the houses while the average outbuilding served as a shelter to 5 people. As many as 30 people stay on some of the stands.

The initial response of the BTC to the land invasion was to have the WCRC leadership arrested by the police. The community reacted with a march to the police station to demand the release of its leaders. After the WCRC leaders had been released, an emergency sitting of the BTC listened to representations from the

WCRC on the right of people from Wattville to remain in occupation of Tamboville.

The outcome was an agreement between the WCRC and the BTC that, not only could settlement on the land continue, but the BTC would allocate R2 million from its Capital Development Fund for the provision of basic services in the area. It was further agreed that a low-income housing development would be established at Tamboville under the direction of a Joint Technical Committee made up of representatives of the WCRC and the BTC.

Since then the WCRC has been playing a direct role in planning the development of Tamboville. The Joint Technical Committee has been working in co-operation with members of the planning organisation Planact. Because a systematic programme of workshops and reportbacks has been maintained, this has permitted the needs, aspirations and opinions of the future residents of Tamboville to be incorporated in the planning process.

The clinic

In the past Wattville residents have been largely reliant on the health services provided in neighbouring Actonville. However the staff and services provided at the clinic are inadequate to provide for the combined health needs of the populations of the two townships.

The initial plans for the development of Tamboville made provision for a clinic site. Planact then approached the Department of Community Health at Wits Medical School who drew up a proposal for the development of a comprehensive primary health care service in Tamboville. As part of the service the Community Health Department put forward guidelines for the running of the clinic. The envisaged clinic was to provide both curative and preventive services but not in-patient or delivery facilities.

The health committee

At about the time of the land invasion, a health committee was also appointed by Wattville residents to look into the health issues facing prospective Tamboville residents. Initially the committee consisted of five members but some of the committee members did not participate in the activities of the committee.

Community health problems

Asked about the health issues facing the community, committee members indicated

that in one area adjacent to Wattville there was no running water or toilet facilities. Another problem was the disposal of rubbish. People throw rubbish almost anywhere, they said. In particular people who had recently moved into an area are often unconcerned about the cleanliness of their environment.

One major problem is that people in the community often tend to be secretive about health problems facing themselves or members of their families. People appeared to fear public ridicule even for fairly common health problems such as TB. So as to keep a disabled child hidden from other members of the community, parents will keep the child confined in their homes.

Another problem relates to the quality of treatment received from doctors. This applies particularly to doctors operating from practices in the surrounding areas. One complaint is that doctors will supply medicine to a patient without fully examining the patient first. Committee members are of the opinion that it is mainly black patients who receive this kind of treatment. Hospital and ambulance fees are also a source of difficulty. At the nearby Boksburg-Benoni hospital people are required to pay a minimum of R15 per consultation. Ambulances will not take people to hospital even in an emergency unless an amount of R26 is first paid.

Winning people's trust

Committee members said that they had initially attempted to pay door to door visits in the community but people had generally been suspicious of them and seemed not to be interested in health. Some people had become angry at what they saw as interference by health committee members in their personal affairs. Since then the health committee has been trying to work through the street committees.

The committee acknowledged that it was a problem getting community members to take an active interest in health issues. "People just want to go to the doctor and that's it," said one committee member. Nevertheless it was felt that people would begin to appreciate the committee. For example the committee felt that they would be able to provide guidance to community members about what kind of treatment it would be reasonable to expect from doctors. Furthermore if people had problems with the kind of treatment they were receiving at the clinic they would be able to take these up with the committee.

Defining community health needs

In September a meeting was held with the purpose of defining the most important health needs of the community. Members of the WCRC, the health committee, and

representatives from the BTC Health Department, the Wits Community Health Department, and Planact, attended the meeting. Those at the meeting identified a number of important areas which would require attention:

1. The meeting felt that there was need for education on topics such as first aid, alcoholism, drug addiction, parenthood, oral re-hydration of babies, violence. Other suggestions provided by the health committee are information on strokes, back-ache, smoking, breast-feeding and nutrition.
2. Education about and treatment of AIDs and other sexually transmitted diseases.
3. Children's health services - immunisation etc.
4. Health services for women, including family planning, pap smears, maternity and ante-natal care.
5. Emergency services - for accidents and childbirth.
6. Chronic care for diabetes, high blood pressure, hypertension, arthritis, and TB.
7. Care for special groups such as the aged, disabled, and those requiring psychological services.
8. Dental care.

Why do we need community participation in health care?

Under the present system people have become accustomed to receiving health care as a commodity. This means that, like other goods which are bought in a shop, health care is received in exchange for money. But when we leave the doctors rooms we may have received some medicine or a prescription but usually we have learnt very little about what is actually wrong with us or what we can do to avoid the same problem in the future.

One reason for encouraging people to participate in addressing the health issues which face their communities is to provide them with knowledge so that they can better look after their own health. This doesn't mean that doctors will not be necessary. But if people understand more about their own health it is believed that they will become less dependent on doctors and be able to avoid many of the simple health problems which are related to the way that people lead their daily lives.

One very good example of this is in relation to nutrition. The kind of food that one eats has an important effect on ones health. However, when one goes to the doctor it is very rare for the doctor to sit down with one to talk about ones diet. What would be of use to people therefore is if they could be provided with information about things like nutrition. But people need to involve themselves in

health issues if they are to empower themselves with the knowledge to take more responsibility for the health of themselves and their families.

An additional reason for encouraging community participation in health is related to the present way in which health care is structured. Doctors have become accustomed to attending to the health problems of wealthier people in our society as it is mainly wealthy people who have been able to afford the high costs of health care. However, all people do not suffer from the same health problems. A community based health committee can act as a means whereby doctors are put in touch with people's real health problems so that they can provide a positive service to all their patients and not simply to the wealthier ones.

A Township Residents Health Committee - a proposal compiled by the Tamboville Health Committee and Critical Health

Aims and objectives

To promote the health of the community and to encourage community members to participate in the promotion of health.

To promote awareness amongst community members about health.



Health committees can act as a means whereby doctors are put in contact with the communities real health problems. Photo: Medico Health Project

- To provide health information and advice to people in the community.
- To ensure that appropriate health services are provided for the community.
- To facilitate community participation in the running of the clinic in order to ensure that full and proper use is made of resources and facilities

Responsibilities

In consultation with the staff at the local clinic and the community the committee should:

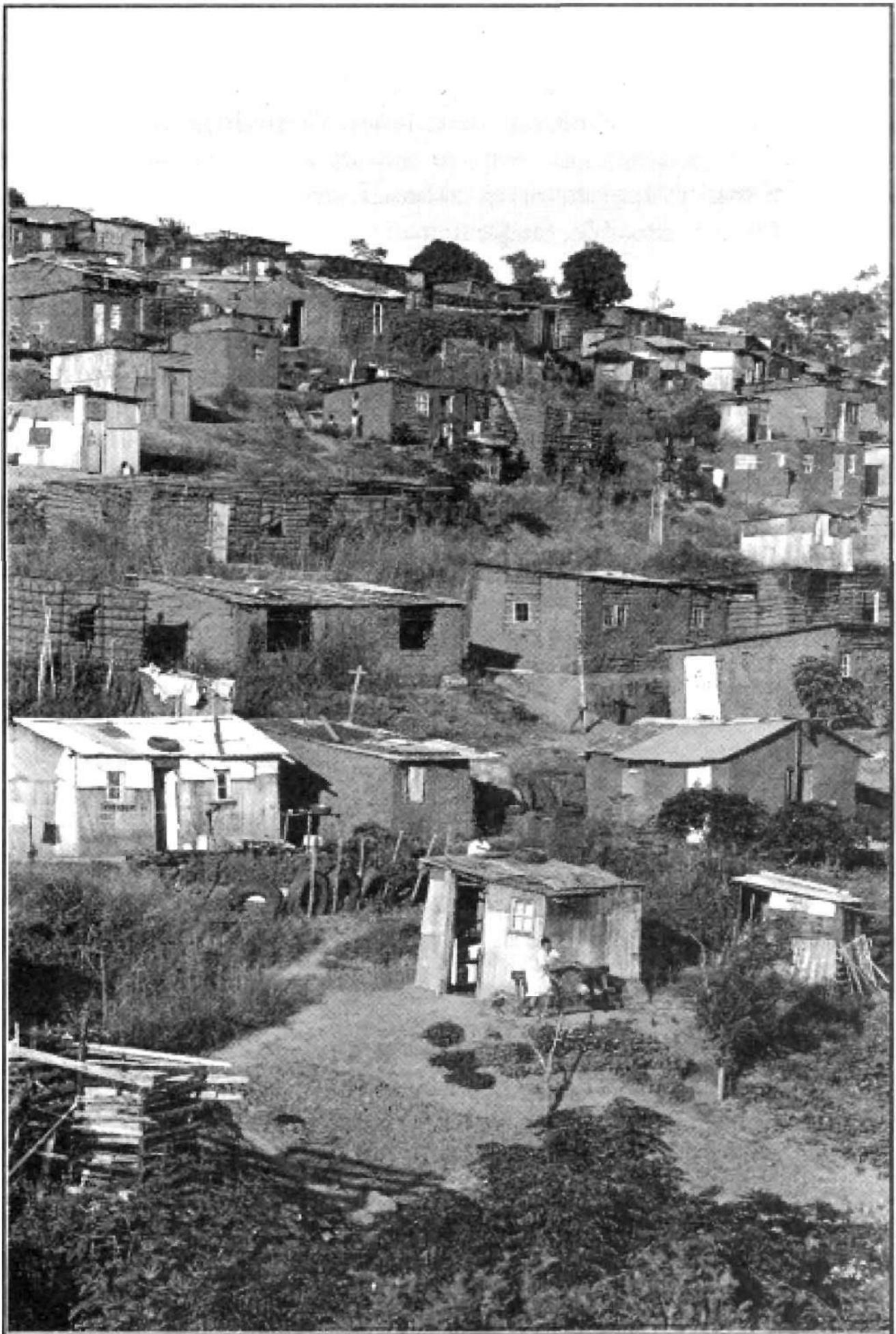
- Decide clinic opening and closing times.
- Advise the health workers at the clinic about what health services need to be provided.
- Decide what health education topics are important to the community.
- Communicate "health messages" to the community.
- To coordinate provision for community care of the seriously ill and others in need of assistance.
- To encourage members of the community (particularly health workers) to become involved in the activities of the committee.
- Liaise with relevant local authority (the feeling was that in Tamboville the BTC was preferable to the Wattville Town Council. However once a democratic and accountable local authority is elected in Wattville/ Tamboville, this would be the body through which the health committee conducted its affairs).
- In conjunction with the town council, to implement participatory research programmes in the community.

Composition of the committee

At present health committee members in Wattville are involved in the committee on a voluntary basis. It is suggested that one or two of the committee members could eventually be employed either in a full-time or part time capacity. This would have to depend on an assessment of what the actual workload of committee members is and of whether the committee is making a real practical contribution to the improvement of health in the community. Furthermore, even if some committee members are employed, the committee should nevertheless encourage voluntary participation by community members in its activities.

Requirements for participation

Committee members should be resident in Tamboville/Wattville. They should have a commitment to the community and be interested in the health and welfare of the community. It is not necessary that they have any medical or health related qualifications but it may be necessary to provide basic training in community health issues to them. Committee office bearers should not be employed at the community



Informal settlement - a community based health committee can act to put health workers in touch with people's real health problems. Photo: Cedric Nunn

clinic.

Appointment

The health committee is a democratic committee. Committee members should be prepared to work in a democratic way, to consult with community members and particularly community representatives, to be accountable to the community, and to promote, in so far as is possible, the participation of community members in the activities of the committee.

Committee office bearers could be directly elected by the community. However, due to financial and time constraints, it may be preferable for the office bearers to be appointed by a democratically elected local authority/town council.

Tamboville and Wattville

The clinic has been built in Tamboville but will also be used by Wattville residents. In the same way the committee that has been formed has been formed to promote the health of Tamboville residents but could potentially be developed into a health committee for the Tamboville/Wattville area.

(Thanks to Planact for advice and assistance)

References

1. Planact Annual Report - 1989/90.
2. Wattville Concerned Residents Committee - Briefing document prepared for the Benoni Town Council. 10 July 1990. In *History in the Making*, November 1990, vol. 1 no. 2 pp56-62.

VNS have produced a video dealing with the struggle for land and housing in Tamboville. The video stresses the important role of democratic participation by people in the community. Contact VNS for further details at P.O. Box 16455, Doornfontein, Jhb, 2028. Tel: (011) 23-5668. Fax: (011) 23-5353.