

# Primary Health Care: Expectations and Tasks for Public Health in Trinidad and Tobago

Emmanuel Janagan Johnson<sup>1</sup> · Vincent Rodrigues<sup>2</sup>

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**Abstract** The government of Trinidad and Tobago considers that the enjoyment of the highest attainable level of health is a basic right of every citizen and has a goal to achieve health for all by 2020. Thus it lays emphasis on caring and assures standards of excellence to promote, protect and improve the health status of the people of Trinidad and Tobago. To achieve these goals it is very important to increase curative services as well as preventive services in the country. In view of this situation there is a need to overcome the challenges the public health by involving community and individuals and self-reliance to achieve Health for all at 2020. Community participation is one of the domains of community capacity building in a small island country. It is one of the mechanisms to empower people to take part in community development. In this paper, the nature, the dimensions of community participation, and its role and scope in implementation of different components of primary health care have been described. The health services in public and remedial care have been discussed. The article highlights some important milestone achievements in the health sector in Trinidad.

**Keywords** Community participation · Primary health care · Tasks · Health indicators · Community based services

## Introduction

Health is influenced by a number of complex interactions between environmental factors, socioeconomic factors, health behaviours, health services and genetic factors. These factors are known as the determinants of our health. They do not work in isolation but rather combine together to affect individual health and by extension the health of the population. There is evidence that the demographic situation of Trinidad and Tobago over the last ten years has undergone changes from high fatality and mortality that approximately balance each other to the current demographic situation in which births and deaths are low and also approximately balance out. The country is in an advanced stage of demographic transition depicted by a population structure in which the number of children below the age of 15 years has decreased while the number of persons 60 years and older has doubled [16].

## Health Issues

Though people living in Trinidad and Tobago face with many health issues, among all the health problems depression is undiagnosed significant health problem. A survey conducted in Trinidad and Tobago reported the prevalence of depression among the community sampled of 14 % [1]. Another study also reported high rates of depression for adolescents in this country and this was found to be associated with home violence and substance

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✉ Emmanuel Janagan Johnson  
Emmanuel.JanaganJohnson@sta.uwi.edu

Vincent Rodrigues  
Vincent.Rodrigues@sta.uwi.edu

<sup>1</sup> Department of Behavioural Sciences, Faculty of Social Sciences, The University of the West Indies, St. Augustine Campus, St. Augustine, Trinidad & Tobago

<sup>2</sup> Department of Pre-Clinical Sciences, Faculty of Medical Sciences, The University of the West Indies, St. Augustine Campus, St. Augustine, Trinidad & Tobago

abuse [8]. Another challenging health issue is Childhood obesity. Childhood obesity is a growing concern in Trinidad and Tobago. Recent research has shown that a quarter (25 %) of school-aged children (5–18 years) is overweight or obese. Childhood obesity remains a major concern due to its impact on the development of risk factors leading to chronic non-communicable diseases (CNCDs) such as cardiovascular diseases, cancer, diabetes and strokes later on in life. There has already been the emergence of CNCDs like diabetes in children and youth populations [15].

## Life Expectancy

Life expectancy is an indicator of the overall health of a population. It indicates the expected average life span of a new born given prevailing health conditions. In other words, it measures the average length of life of an individual in the population can be expected to attain. Life expectancy in Trinidad and Tobago has been increasing. In 2006, the expectancy of life for the overall population was 71 years. There were, however, significant gender differences. The expectancy of life for males is lower (66 years in 2006) than that of females (72 years). Although the life expectancy of Trinidadians and Tobagonians has increased over the years, it has done so at a slower rate when compared to some of our Caribbean neighbours such as Barbados and Jamaica. Males in Barbados can expect to live to 72 years and females 79 years while Jamaican males and females have a life expectancy of 69 and 75 years respectively [11]. According to the United Nations, Trinidad and Tobago is ranked 116th in the world in terms of life expectancy. Our international counterparts have far greater life expectancies. Japanese females can expect to live to 86 years and males to 79.2 years. Australian females can expect to live to 83.7 years and males to 79 years [16].

## Community Participation

Community participation has long been recognized as an effective means of helping rural and urban people focusing energy and mobilizing resources to solve their health, environmental, and economic problems through awareness. When people from the community organize, plan, share tasks with professionals, contribute financially to projects or programs, and help make decisions about activities that affect their lives, programs are more likely to achieve their objectives.

Several countries have created ways for communities to participate in the health programmes. They have found that individuals make better choices about activities when participate in the health programs in their villages or urban

neighbourhoods. True participation involves a high level of empowerment of the public and a direct input into the decision process, and decried approaches that appear to be participative yield real power. Community development has, for example, been linked to community organization, community-based initiatives, community mobilization, community capacity building and citizen participation [4].

Community participation can be defined as the involvement of people in the community level health programmes to solve their own problems. People cannot be forced to participate in the health programmes which affect their lives but should be given the opportunity where ever is possible. Community participation is more important during emergency health situations like break out of EBOLA, and other contagious diseases which spread through virus. The successful outcome of all community health programmes lies in the active participation of the people. Community and participation are conceptualized and practiced [5]. Participation may be defined at a general level as the practice of consulting and involving members of the public in creating awareness, stopping the spread of contagious diseases, and extending helping hand to the health ministries to mitigate the impact of spread of diseases [6].

## Health Services: Public Health and Curative Services

### Country Context

Trinidad and Tobago officially the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, is a twin island country situated off the northern edge of South America mainland, lying 11 km (6 mi) just off the coast of north-eastern Venezuela and 130 km (81 mi) south of Grenada. Bordering the Caribbean to the north, it shares maritime boundaries with other nations including Barbados to the northeast, Grenada to the northwest, Guyana to the southeast, and Venezuela to the south and west. The country covers an area of 5128 km<sup>2</sup> (1980 sq mi) and consists of two main islands, Trinidad and Tobago, with numerous smaller landforms. The two main islands are divided into nine regions, and one ward. Sangre Grande is the largest of the country's nine regions, comprising about 18 % of the total area and 10 % of the total population of the country. Trinidad and Tobago lies outside of the hurricane belt [17].

### Important Health Indicators

Trinidad and Tobago has held on to a reasonably stable economic environment, but the country has been affected by the global economic crisis. There was

significant economic growth from 2000 to 2007 (slightly over 8 %), followed by declines in 2007 and 2008, 23.5 % growth in 2009, and just over 2 % growth noted in 2010 [13]. Protracted rises in the core inflation rate peaked in 2007 at 7.9 %, but by August 2010 the rate was down to 4.1 % (Central Statistical Office, Key-Indicators). Trinidad and Tobago has prioritized and made significant progress in improving the health of its population.

Health is influenced by a number of complex interactions between environmental factors, socioeconomic factors, health behaviours, health services and genetic factors. These factors are known as the indicator/determinants of health. They do not work in isolation but rather combine together to affect individual health and by extension the health of the population. All the indicators shown a steady improvement, but still remain more to be done and to be achieved (Table 1). Focusing on prevention and public health aspects of health services needs to be strengthening by mobilizing local community.

This indicator measures the number of children dying before the age of one year old. Like the life expectancy indicator, it is a measure used to determine a country’s level of health and development. In Trinidad and Tobago the Infant Mortality rate has been steadily decreasing over the last few years. As of 2006 (latest available data from the Central Statistical Office), our Infant Mortality rate was 13.1 deaths per 1000 live births. This figure represented a decline of approximately 45 % in the Infant Mortality Rate between the years 2002–2006. Data from public hospitals show that over the past three decades, injury, poisoning and other consequences of external causes was also ranked as the top reasons for hospital admissions. For the period 2002–2006, there was an average 11,463 cases of injury discharged from hospitals per year. Though often undiagnosed and untreated, depression is a significant health problem. Although the precise causes of mental illness are varied, certain factors may increase one’s risk of presenting with clinical signs and symptoms associated with mental illnesses.

### Substance Abuse

The National Alcohol and Drug Abuse Prevention Programme (NADAPP) report found that the average age of first time use of alcoholic beverages was 10.9 years with 75 % of all students having initiated alcohol use by age 13. Six of every ten students (57.4 %) felt that this practice was very harmful and only 4.3 % felt it was not harmful. About one-fifth (20.4 %) of students felt this was moderately harmful and 5.3 % did not know of the harm associated with frequently drinking alcoholic beverages.

### Diabetes and Obesity

Another recent survey conducted by the Diabetes Education Research and Prevention Institute (DERPI), has highlighted the significant increase in the prevalence of diabetes and obesity among school children [2]. This study, (results reported in the UWI TODAY) [3], which tested 67,000 school children aged 5–17 years in Trinidad for urine glucose during 2009, found that in testing every 100,000 children, 10 children with Type 2 diabetes and 19 children with difficulty in handling ingested glucose were detected. The survey also revealed that many of the children had undiagnosed Type 2 diabetes in their family.

### Leading Causes of Death

- Cardiovascular disease
- Malignant neoplasm
- Diabetes mellitus
- Cerebrovascular disease
- Injury/external causes

The health status of a population is reflected in the number and rates of underlying causes of death. These

**Table 1** Leading health issues affecting different age groups

Target group	Age	Leading cause of morbidity
Infants	Under 1 year	Infectious and parasitic diseases and acute respiratory infections
Pre-school children	1–under 5 years	Infectious and parasitic diseases and acute respiratory infections
School-age children	5–14 years	External causes (injuries)
Young adults	15–24 years	External causes (injuries)
Adults	25–44 years	External causes (injuries)
Older adults	45–64	Diseases of the heart
Elderly	65+	Diseases of the heart

Courtesy: Health Status Report Card, Ministry of Health

causes give insight into the factors contributing to disease and disability in the nation.

Sixty percent of all deaths in Trinidad and Tobago are due to chronic non-communicable diseases (CNCDS). CNCDS are conditions that do not result from infectious or transmissible conditions. CNCDS cause dysfunction or impairment in quality of life and usually develop over relatively long periods often being asymptomatic at first. CNCDS are similar in that they are all linked by a common set of modifiable biological and behavioural risk factors primarily obesity, high cholesterol, high blood sugar, high blood pressure, unhealthy diet, physical inactivity, tobacco consumption and alcohol abuse.

### Role and Scope of Community Participation in Primary Health Care

When residents of a community actively involved in community level health programmes, people gain a better understanding of the health benefits of the programmes and thus increase their commitment to strengthening and expanding the program to reach wider social organizations. Community social organizations usually refers to the ability of a community usually neighbourhood [10]. Community participation is always more effective in implementing health programmes. Sometimes a community will select representatives who are designated to work in partnership with social workers in organizing, planning, implementing, and monitoring the health programmes. The activities carried out by these community representatives' supplements and support the activities of the community health programmes. For example [9] proposed community pharmacy is an ideal location for providing smoking cessation therapy to large numbers of patients.

### Community Based Services (CBS)

A community-based system of care requires systems to see the home, school, and neighborhood of the family from an asset perspective, and to identify the natural supports in these familiar surroundings as part of a strengths-based approach. For example in a community usually, several members of the community will be selected and trained to visit people in their homes on a regularly scheduled basis to create awareness on AIDS. These community members, neighbors, or relatives of the clients can often may enrich their knowledge on AIDS awareness and they also gather first-hand information on AIDS victims, causes for the spread of AIDS, methods of blood testing available, like ELIZA or WESTERN BLOT, precaution to be taken while administering injection to the neighborhood. Because they

live in the community, they can respond rapidly to questions or blames if unattended, it could lead to spread of unwanted information or wrong concepts. These community representatives are sometimes paid for their work or may receive payment in kind [7]. Stacy et al. [12] highlights that the Community Empowerment Center used a community-engaged approach to build capacity among residents to develop and implement interventions focused on creating a healthier environment.

### Conclusion

Community participation will not just happen if we arrange just a few meetings and keep hoping for the best. The ability to bring about participation has to be learnt and practiced; at the beginning many of the poorest and most exploited communities may not grasp the idea at all, nor show any interest. By making our aims clear, have community attachment through listening and respect for community members, and making the people realize that we are not merely providers, then their participation will be genuine. Avoiding professional biases that misguide real practice and aiming to bridge between academic work and practice. In Trinidad and Tobago, Heart Disease, Cancer, Diabetes Mellitus and Cerebrovascular Disease which leads to strokes are the leading CNCDS. The government is able to get a good support through Community Level Workers to create awareness in the community through which they are able to achieve a positive progression in health indicators for the past four decades. The Government of Trinidad and Tobago is committed to bring positive improvement in the health status of the population by making the health care affordable and accessible to all. For community-based health promotion to become a mainstream mode of dealing with public health, a major reorientation of attitudes in government and medical circles will have to occur. Moreover, the political realities of social change needed to occur with community development in order to pursue a more equitable system do not sit well with many health professionals.

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