

development still needing further attention. **Team-based solutions** are usually more innovative than those of individuals.

Sitting together as teams helped us find our own solutions.

- Exposure to other situations equips and encourages individuals and groups to **explore other alternatives**. The inputs by various teams visiting Impendle-Pholela-Underberg (IPU) District resulted in their DMT redefining some of the issues and trying other ways of dealing with them.

What I really enjoyed was the way in which you all kept prodding our minds to make us think, and think, and think! This has been a useful learning experience for me, not only with my work environment but also my home life.

- Districts and their management teams often operate in relative isolation. Cross-site visits help these individuals to **contextualise their own settings and problems** and to **build relationships and gain support**. The IPU District Manager has linked with colleagues in Mt. Frere and Mt. Currie since a cross-site visit and now feels supported by people with whom she can identify.
- Cross-site visits allow health workers to establish bench marks against which to **assess their own progress**.

Much was learnt about other districts - their composition, their experience, their progress in DHS implementation, the problems they experience and the innovative ways in which these are being addressed. It also became clear how much districts differ from one another and how difficult comparisons are.

- Members of the hosting DMT **gain confidence** in what they are doing after each presentation to their counterparts. The praises and constructive criticism received from the visitors challenges team members to new life. (The IPU District Drug Coordinator, who at one stage declared that he did not feel fit to take on the responsibility, had a complete change of heart after the first cross-site visit).
- Although some members of the teams are junior staff members in their district health facilities, their involvement in the cross-site visits and their

contribution to the district has **gained them recognition**.

- Cross-site visits encourage the teams to understand that every small contribution takes the district forward. Change and development are slow processes!

The main negative aspect of cross-site visits is the cost in terms of money and time. Actual costs include items like travel costs, meals, accommodation, communication (e.g. telephone calls) and materials. Time costs include the considerable time required by the hosts for preparation and implementation and by the visitors for travelling, the visit and, hopefully, post-visit debriefing and reporting. Such time usage must be weighed against the loss of productive time in a busy schedule in the workplace.

Issues to consider when planning a cross-site visit

The success of a cross-site visit is largely dependent on the quality of planning that precedes the visit and on creating an environment conducive to meaningful interaction. Factors contributing to a conducive environment could include:

- A climate of trust
- Non-judgmental attitudes
- Concern and support for each other
- A situation where all are both learners and teachers.

Indicators of an environment conducive to learning and open interaction would include:

- open discussion on both successes and failures
- a willingness to share and learn from each other and
- participants maintaining open and receptive minds.

Visits vary tremendously from situation to situation and it is therefore not possible to map out a “blue print” for cross-site visits. Some overall considerations and lessons can however be shared to assist others in planning such visits.

Practical issues to be considered include:

- **Identify visit organisers:** identify an individual and a deputy responsible for organising the visit from both sides (i.e. the visiting group and the hosting group) and exchange contact details.
- **Group size:** ideally a visiting group should consist

of less than 12 people. Larger groups should be broken into smaller groups and hosted independently.

- **Clarify the expectations of the visitors:** ensure that visitors don't “attend the wrong visit”! Very often this clarifying of objectives will be done as a joint activity between the visit organisers from both sides.
- **Costs:** clarify who will carry the costs of the visit and how and when payments will be made.
- **Visitors' preparation:** participants should prepare for the visit by reading carefully selected information on the district or the specific health issue. Organisers should avoid recommending whole books or bulky documents, rather specifying important chapters or pages in these documents. A paper with a few leading questions could set the scene for some of the discussions, or a case study on an issue with which the host district is struggling.
- **Depth or breadth:** rather arrange fewer activities and ensure that they “meet their mark” than have too many activities handled on a superficial basis.

Preparations within the district should include:

- **Acceptance and commitment by the role-players:** since cross-site visits are time consuming and demanding, the role-players must fully commit themselves to hosting the visit. Approval/acceptance must also be obtained from the various facility authorities and committees.
- **Cross-site visit programme:** an organising group, preferably including representatives from each affected facility/group, should together design the programme once the visitors' objectives and expectations have been clarified. Select activities suitable for achieving the objective (e.g. workshops/facility visits) and identify who will present each during part of the programme.
- **Introductions:** introductions between the visiting group and the hosts are important. The customary way of going around the room and each one giving their name is seldom successful. Seek a method that gives individuals a way to remember the other person.
- **Visitors' orientation:** ensure that visitors are well orientated to the district both through pre-visit reading and an introductory talk. Include issues

such as geography, demography, land-use, economic linkages and patterns, distribution of health facilities and services in the district and region, and district budget. Preferably provide specific facility details when actually at the facility, such as patient load, number of beds, staff structure and referral procedures. District maps (A4 size) and fact sheets with the important facts are useful for visitors to contextualise the information gained from the visit and to take home.

- **Cross-site visit planner:** prepare and distribute to all involved with the visit a regularly updated “cross-site visit planner” recording agreed upon tasks, the responsible person and the planned completion date. The visit organiser must monitor completion of tasks on an ongoing basis.
- **Materials for visitors' preparation:** the hosts must identify the visitors' preparation materials discussed above and supply these to the visiting organiser in time for its timely distribution prior to their departure from their home base.
- **Preparation of presenters:** the visit organiser must ensure that each presenter is clear on what is expected of him/her; who the audience will be and what their expectations are; the aim of the presentation (in relation to the overall programme); how it will be structured and presented; as well as ways of evaluating presentations during and after the event. Experience gained by district team members is invaluable, but as in anything first-timers should be helped and guided so as to maximise the value of the visitors' experience.
- **Group tours of a facility:** where groups are being conducted around a facility the group leader/presenter should appoint a person to “bring up the rear” of the group. The presenter should then not begin talking until the appointed person indicates that all group members have arrived. This prevents speakers addressing the front few only. If possible, avoid large groups – rather break up into subgroups, each with its own guide.
- **Timing of events:** a common problem is that organisers under-estimate the time required for an event, and particularly for traveling. Check these times and allow extra time for arriving and leaving – the larger the group the longer it takes.
- **Accommodation and meals:** arrange accommodation and meals for the visitors and hosts as and when necessary. Check whether