

Repositories, Tools for NGOs Involved in Public Health Activities in Developing Countries

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I. Background

Information International Associates, Inc. (IIa), a woman-owned, small business specializing in information management, performs research for government and commercial clients. IIa's Research Division has researched over 60 studies in the area of public health in less developed countries and regions. The information needed to complete the studies covers a range of health system topics that include statistics for health personnel, infrastructures, disaster preparedness, health financing, and other factors that impact public health care. In our experience, the search for global public health information can be both complex and frustrating. Although this information is often considered "open source" in many countries, it may be difficult to obtain, especially if governmental web sites are not readily available or completely viable, either not functioning at all or only functioning intermittently. In addition, the health information available from the site may be out of date. Many developing countries experience catastrophic events that impact access to public health information. For example, if a country has experienced political instability, natural disaster, civil strife, or other events, the existing medical system may easily be overwhelmed, with resulting health information being minimal at best. Therefore, various resources are consulted for global public health information, including electronic journals, databases, web sites, reference sources, library catalogues, bookstores, newspapers, statistics, electronic books, maps, directories, and grey literature sources. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are one of the primary sources of grey literature used for researching healthcare information for developing countries.

In this publication we describe the role of NGOs in global public health information, elaborate on the problem with NGO grey literature, and describe a possible solution based on the repository concept.

II. Role of NGOs in Public Health Care

NGOs play an important role in global health activities and health research. It is difficult to quantify the number of such organizations. There are 43,500 development organizations listed in the 2005 edition of the Directory of Development Organizations.¹ According to the World Health Organization (WHO), between 70-95% of health services in emergency situations are delivered by NGOs.² The work of many NGOs overlaps, making it difficult to discern those that have a primary focus on health. For instance, NGOs with a focus on sustainable development may also be concerned with poverty, education, and health. In Ecuador, for example, Fundacion FEVI is a non-profit NGO that facilitates intercultural education and volunteer community service. FEVI arranges community service visits from people all over the world to small communities in Ecuador. They work with healthcare centers in addition to centers for elderly people, women's organizations, indigenous communications, human rights organizations, and public schools.³

NGOs play key roles in health systems of developing countries and are recognized for developing innovative initiatives and programs that address health issues. They possess extensive knowledge of local conditions and can provide baseline data on health infrastructure and personnel and major obstacles to improvement. NGOs are often able to reach segments of rural populations that governments neglect or do not target as a priority.⁴

NGOs have roles in public health from the grass roots level to the national and international levels. The WHO has created the following table depicting the health system functions and examples of roles of civil society organizations (CSO)—a type of NGO.⁵