Health images: water images

by Bob Linney

Carefully designed visual aids can help people both remember health messages and improve their visual literacy.

WATER PROGRAMMES, like health programmes, need appropriate communication material if they are to achieve their maximum impact. People from poor communities, whether rural or urban, need basic, practical information that can help them to improve their lives. This can be information about how to maintain their handpump, for example, or about how to prevent diarrhoeal dehydration.

How can these communities get useful information of this kind? Most people do not have a television and, even when they do, programmes are unlikely to be educational. Radio is more widespread, but the poorest people do not have access to it. Batteries may be difficult to get hold of, reception may be bad, and educational programmes are few and far between. Books and newspapers are not common in poor communities, where many people cannot, in any case, read.

Access to information

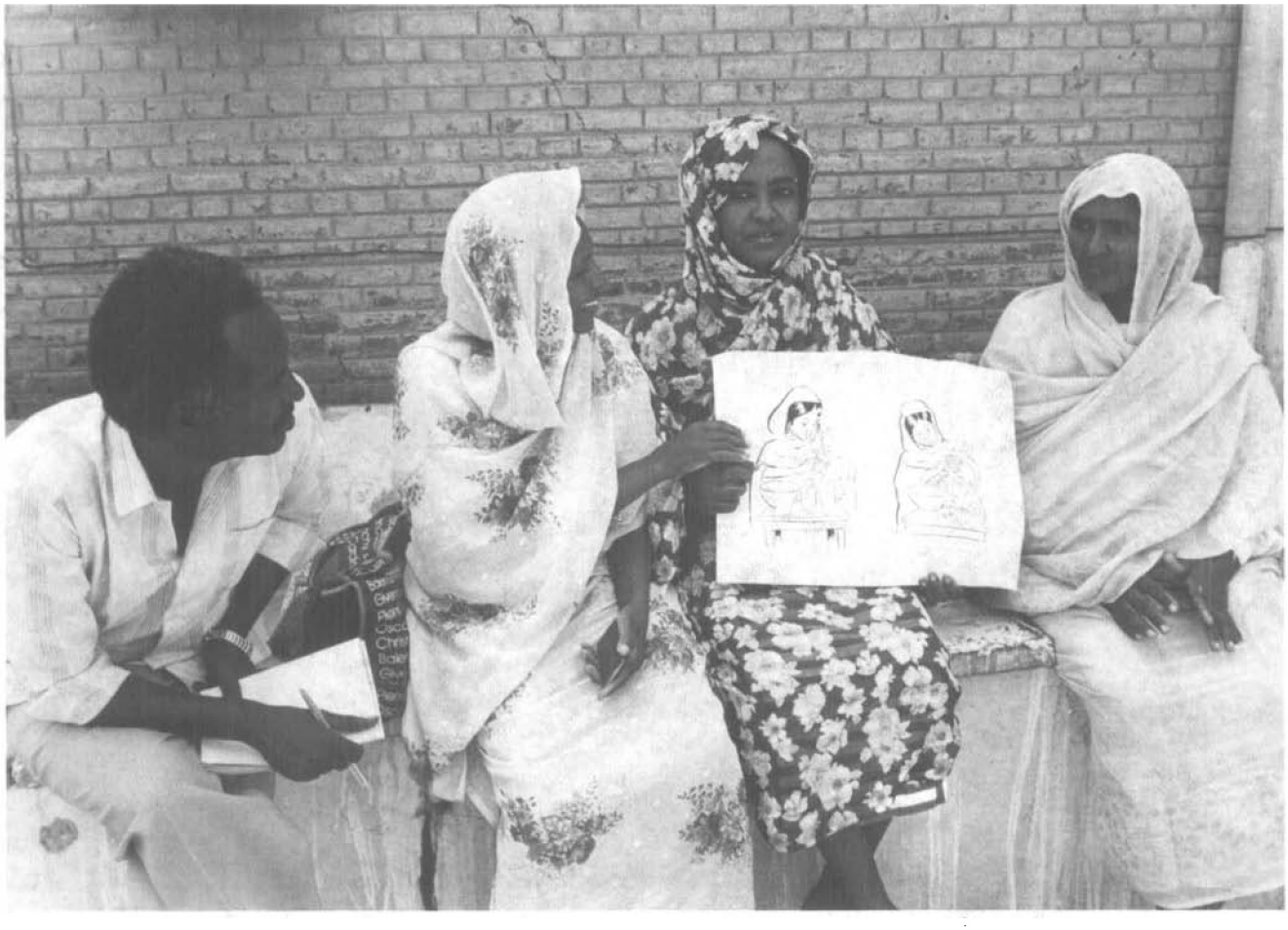
Information can reach people, however, via their local community health workers. Typically the community worker talks either to individuals or groups from his or her community about important local issues concerning primary health care. Simple posters, flipcharts, and other visual aids can help the community worker to explain and communicate useful information.

Low-cost visual aids can help people to remember key points about health and other water-related topics. Pictorial materials can reinforce what the community worker says and can, if well-designed, improve the degree to which useful information is shared. An illustrated manual recently produced by UNICEF in Sudan has even made the water programme more cost-effective. Using the manual, village people have learned how to maintain and service their water pumps, thus avoiding the cost of hiring an outside mechanic to do the work.

Unfortunately, visual materials are rarely available in poor countries. Indeed on a global scale there is a chronic shortage of simple educational pictures. Fieldworkers trying to promote health education in relation to water and environmental sanitation have few visual aids to help them get their messages across. The same is true for community workers in all developing countries, regardless of the sector in which they operate.

Local production

Health Images (HI) is one of the few organizations that specifically aims to improve the availability of visual materials for fieldworkers.



Using locally produced material for health promotion in Sudan.

This is done by helping to conduct training workshops for local groups where community workers learn how to design and print their own visual aids locally.

Participants at these training workshops are normally community health or extension workers who need effective posters, manuals, flipcharts and other visual aids. The participants have generally had no previous experience in graphics or printing. Nevertheless, by the end of the two-weeks' training, each person will have designed, pretested and printed copies of their own visual aid. A simple silkscreen printing method is used for making multiple copies. This method can be used in rural or urban situations, and requires neither piped water nor electricity.

Local design and production is essential if visual aids are to be really relevant and appropriate to local people. In addition to the training, simple, low-cost printing kits are supplied to the communities. Many past communication failures involving pictorial materials can be ascribed to the syndrome of men in cities designing visual aids for use by women in villages. Local production by community-level workers also gives a degree of empowerment and ensures local control of the 'media'.

Demonstrating a portable silk screening unit that needs neither piped water nor electricity.

Visual literacy

Designing and using simple pictorial materials, however, is not without its potential pitfalls. Many of the world's poor have difficulty understanding pictures. This may be because they do not know the meaning of visual symbols like crosses and arrows, do not understand three-dimensional pictorial perspective, or are not familiar with the numerous pictorial conventions that people in the rich world take for granted.

The silk screen process can produce very effective posters, like this one from a workshop in Mexico City.

Low levels of visual literacy stem from the fact that many poor people, particularly in rural areas, see very few educational pictures during their normal daily lives. In contrast to children from industrialized countries, who learn how to decode visual information from picture books, television and illustrated comics at a very early age, children from poor communities often see no more than a handful of drawn or printed images.

Given that people may have difficulty understanding pictures, how can visual materials help them to learn about health and water issues? One approach is to design educational pictures in such a way that they are tailored to suit the degree and type of visual literacy of the audience or community with whom

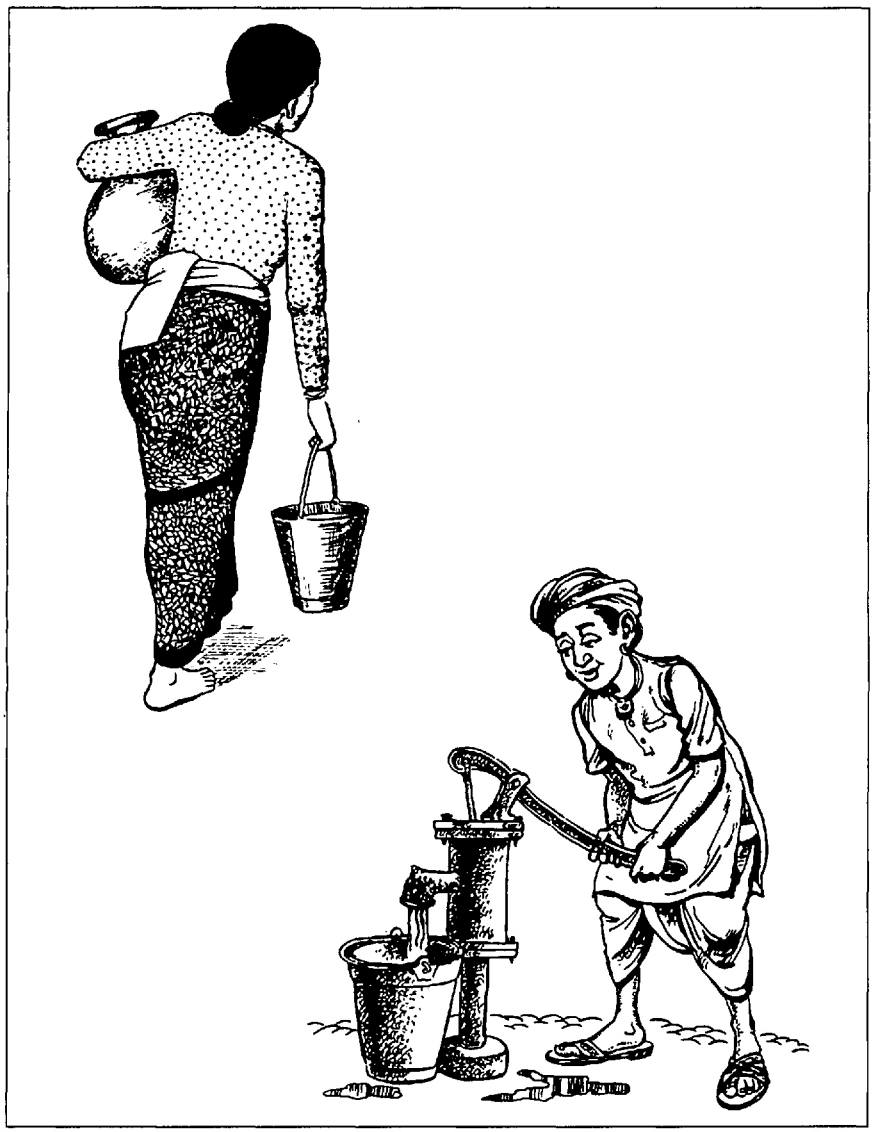
the visual aids are to be used. Thus if, for example, people do not understand the representation of depth, or of three-dimensions, one should not attempt to use visual aids in which spatial depth is shown.

Improving skills

This is a sensible approach for the designer to adopt, but, if it is the only approach used, it has some negative implications. If people only see pictures that are adapted to their present visual capabilities, they are not being given the opportunity to improve their skills by attempting to interpret unfamiliar graphic or representational styles. In other words, this approach does little to help people to improve their levels of visual literacy, and hence to expand the range of materials from which they might derive useful information.

The approach outlined above fails to recognize that people can learn to understand previously incomprehensible styles or visual conventions. Since the publication of a research report entitled 'Re-Thinking Visual Literacy', there is now clear evidence that even the poorest rural people can quickly learn how to decode pictures. The research study was carried out in a group of villages in Nepal by a team led by George McBean, now communications officer for UNICEF in the Caribbean. Villagers who had been given minimal training in how to 'read' a range of pictures showed significant improvements in their levels of visual literacy when compared to their counterparts in other, similar village communities who had not been given such help.

A health worker pre-tests a poster she had made during a workshop in western Kenya with local women.



Two of the pictures used in the visual literacy study carried out in rural Nepal that showed how quickly people learn to decode pictures.

These findings have implications for the way we carry out work with visual materials. A little time invested by the fieldworker in explaining some basic visual conventions to his or her community may make subsequent visual communication attempts more effective. In the same way that reading and writing skills are generally considered useful in terms of empowerment, development programmes should recognize the usefulness of helping people to improve their visual literacy skills. ●

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