Maternal social capital in rural Nicaragua: Implications for a behavior change communication (BCC) strategy

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Summary
Qualitative research was conducted in four municipalities in rural, northern Nicaragua. Maternal social capital was measured to see how it can be used to improve behavior change communication related to maternal and child health.

Background
Though some gains have been made toward better nutrition overall, maternal and child nutrition continue to plague the health and well-being of the poor in Nicaragua.
- 6.8% of children under 5 suffer from underweight status
- 16.9% of children under 5 suffer from stunting

The returns to investing in nutrition are very high. Because of its lasting effects on immunity, cognitive development and physical wellbeing, nutrition is critical to human development – cutting across all areas of health and economic wellbeing. This is why CARE places a special focus on infant and young child feeding and related maternal nutrition practices.

The Window of Opportunity Program is a global initiative that works to promote, protect and support optimal infant and young child feeding and related maternal nutrition practices in Southeast Asia, Africa and Latin America. The program uses a mixture of interventions that resonate with people’s concerns, survival strategies, perceived risks, information needs and cultural practices.

Behavior is a combination of cultural practices, social interactions and human feelings. CARE uses social analysis and formative research to develop tailored messages and approaches using a variety of communication channels to develop positive behaviors; promote and sustain individual, community and societal behavior change; and maintain appropriate behaviors. In all of CARE’s programming locally situated knowledge and cultural strategies are incorporated to design and implement our programming.

One area of interest for CARE’s Window of Opportunity Program is in social capital. Social capital is created when groups of people work together for a common interest. On an individual basis, social capital may be describe as having cognitive components – what one feels about their relationship with others – and structural components – what one does with others.

Objectives
The three objectives of this research project are the following:

Objective #1
To identify mothers’ attitudes, feelings and beliefs toward community participation

Objective #2
To identify local level institutions that address IYCF (structural social capital)

Objective #3
To assess the nature of interpersonal relations (cognitive social capital)

Methods
Setting
- Dept. of Matagalpa
- Dept. of Jinotega
- El Clío
- Bocay

Target Population
- Pregnant and lactating women
- Community health workers (Irigaistas)
- Over 18 years of age

Recruitment
Participants were recruited with the help of CARE country staff, community health workers and directors of maternity waiting homes via non-probability convenience sampling.

Data Collection
- 17 in-depth interviews, 2 focus group discussions
- Questions addressed social capital and maternal and child health at the community level. For example:
  - What types of groups are available in your community?
  - Why do you join groups? Why do you like to be a member?
  - How do you obtain health information?

Preliminary Results
Some of the initial findings of the research project are outlined below:

- Religious organizations are an important source of social capital for women in rural Nicaragua
- Both women and community health workers participate in groups and organizations as a way to improve their community
- A machista attitude among the men in Nicaraguan communities is a barrier to participation for most women
- Radio and word-of-mouth were the two most often referenced forms of health communication
- Location of health facilities and ease of access are both large barriers for women to receive antenatal and postpartum care
- Community health workers are a key link in the health system of Nicaragua
- In general, the target communities for this project are relatively close-knit, with good relationships among the people

Further Work
Findings from this study provide preliminary insight into the implications of social capital for more sustainable maternal and child health programs in Nicaragua, specifically related to behavior change communication strategies. More collaboration with existing structural social capital institutions is one strategy that may provide behavior change by widening the health communication network. In addition, community health workers can act as change agents to build social capital in rural communities. Research has already shown that increased social capital leads to improved health outcomes. A larger mixed methods study is recommended for future research as a more comprehensive approach to the study of social capital in low-resource countries like Nicaragua,