

Experiences with our good friend, David Sanders

Compartiendo unas vivencias con nuestro gran amigo David Sanders

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I WOULD LIKE TO SHARE SOME EXPERIENCES from the years prior to the launch of the Peoples' Health Movement (PHM) in 2000, especially with those of the younger PHM generation, who should learn more about the prehistory of health activism.

David Sanders and I met in the early 1980s when he was working with David Werner. We had a common history in the human rights and civil rights struggle, David in Africa and I, in the United States and Central America. We were both committed to the Declaration of Alma-Ata and to the concept of comprehensive Primary Health Care (PHC) and capacity-building for community health workers. We were radical activists for Health for All, dreaming and living PHC in societies in transition. In the late 1980s, we were trying to organise a small international meeting of health activists engaged in liberation struggles around the world. Before we could hold the meeting, though, we were pre-empted by the realities of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the overthrow of the Sandinista People's Revolution in Nicaragua, where I lived and worked.

Towards the end of 1991, we held our meeting of activists from societies in transition, not to our socialist dream, but societies facing neoliberal policies and severe structural adjustment programmes. That international meeting led to the formation of a small network of health activists and academics with a radical position on PHC and Health for All. For ten years, that network, the International Peoples' Health Council (IPHC), organised and/or took part in international meetings around the world: an IPHC meeting in Palestine in 1993, then in South Africa after apartheid. We shared out particular points of view in the World Health Organisation's World Health Assembly, at the Copenhagen Social Development Summit, at United Nations (UN) meetings in Cairo and Beijing, as well as at meetings in Malaysia, the Philippines, India and Australia. In the early years of the IPHC, that new little network was able to produce analyses that were useful for organising worldwide.

The book 'Questioning the solution', by David Sanders and David Werner, was an important tool for academics and community health workers¹. The book's arguments are now study material for public health specialists the world over. David Sanders was never afraid to speak out clearly and emphatically on the structural causes of health problems, the influence of transnationals and especially the medico-pharmaceutical-industrial complex – and he did not mince his words. He argued with conviction that our struggle for health could never stop.

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David Werner (who wrote the book ‘Where there is no doctor’) and I joined David Sanders for sessions of the University of Western Cape’s Summer School programmes, holding workshops on the Child-to-Child methodology. It was brilliant managing to get students with diverse origins and experiences to perceive the importance of involving children in health education and promotion. It was a challenge getting our students to the campus, because the university’s insurance policy did not cover children. With David Sanders’ support, we did it though, and things all went off very well. We thanked David for inviting us, and the teachers and students for teaching us so much about South Africa and the struggle for health there. The School of Public Health opened its doors and classrooms to so many people in South Africa who had never had the opportunity to study before. That was one of David Sanders’ great achievements. There, we saw his commitment not just to health for all, but to the struggle for the human and civil rights of all the many people who passed through the university.

At a meeting in 1997 in Penang (Malaysia), we decided, together with Consumer International and other organisations, to organise a Peoples’ Health Assembly in 2000, to show the world that the Alma Ata promise of Health for All in 2000 had never been kept. To do that, we set up and organised a committee with seven organisations to decide on dates, venues and content for the first assembly.

After much discussion, we decided that the assembly would meet at GK (Gonoshastaya Kendra) in Savar, Bangladesh, given its long history of commitment to the Declaration of Alma Ata. The International Peoples’ Health Committee activists took it on themselves to develop wonderful organisational materials to support preparations for the first assembly. From 1997 to December 2000 I worked with David on the first assembly’s central organising committee. I was the only woman and it was no easy task: there were not that many feminist activists in community health at the time and, more importantly, they were not recognised by their male colleagues – that all came later. Even today, there are not enough feminist activists in the health movement. This is a call to all young women to get more involved.

After the first assembly, most of the IPHC’s members became key figures in the new Peoples’ Health Movement that was born there – and with which we continue today. I hope that the activists of today’s public health movement can learn more about David and about our prehistory. Now, it depends on you young activists full of energy to carry through this important work, which is essential to the struggle for health worldwide.

Collaborator

Zuniga MEH (0000-0002-6981-0170)* is responsible for drafting the manuscript. ■

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