

Community Service in Poor Rural Shaanxi: a Case Study

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From 2008 onwards, our centre began to explore the possibilities of providing health education and care for the elderly as our social service work in a rural area. At the end of that year, we made an expedition to Jun Zi Jian (君子澗) Village, located in the mountainous area of Shangluo (商洛), Shan-nan (陝南). We visited several peasant families there, and chose this village as the first pilot community to which we would provide integrated social services.

Later, the center made a more detailed assessment of the community, and a brief description is as follows:

Jun Zi Jian is located in Shanyang (山陽) County (45km from the county town), southeast of Qinling Mountain, Shaanxi Province. It is a typical mountain village, surrounded by ravines and gullies. In the village, there are 717 people and 205 families, which are scattered in 9 gullies. The villagers live in houses made of earth and wood. They live a simple life, with noodles as their staple food. After the Road Administration built a concrete road to the village, now there is one bus service to the county town per day. The men, being the breadwinners of the families, have to go out to work. They also make a little extra money by selling walnuts, chestnuts and eggs. Most of the men in the village have completed junior high school education, while most of the women are illiterate. Only a few of the latter have attended primary school.

The primary school in the village is in a shabby building, with 6 levels of classes, 5 classrooms, 80 students and 6 teachers. Children of 7 years and older can go to school. As the weather in winter is very cold, the pupils have to bring their own braziers to school. There is no English class, computer class or music class.

However, it is gratifying to see that the school* has joined the Egg and Milk project.

There is one Catholic church in the village, with more than 300 Catholics, two of whom are chairpersons. Some Catholics go to the church every evening to pray. Every Sunday, a priest goes to the village to celebrate Mass.

The people of the community live at subsistence level, which means they can meet basic needs. Due to the particular geographic location, and their environmental and cultural background, the villagers lack an awareness of good health and education. They also suffer from insufficient self-development. It is hard to rely on the community's own capacity to change the status quo. Due to the imbalance in economic growth and the town-country dualism, the educational resources of this mountain area remain insufficient. The Catholic Social Service Centre of Xi'an Diocese got involved in the community as a facilitator and collaborator. Our target group was women, children and elderly people left behind in the village. Our service is health- and education-oriented, aiming to promote a model of rural integrated development. It would be jointly administered by the school and community, and aimed at enhancing the self-development of the villagers. It hoped to foster neighborhood support among the villagers, and a sense of participation by them.

After completing a series of assessments, we launched community work in the following aspects:

1. Site-maintenance, Establishment of a Community Choir and a Women's Group

We encourage the villagers, especially the women, to participate in cultural and recreational activities. After a discussion with the villagers, they paved a cement patio in front of the school, as a place for cultural and recreational activities.

We started a new choir, inviting those with musical talent to teach the other villagers.

When we started to recruit choir members, many villagers offered excuses because they were just unwilling to join. On the first day, about 30 participants showed up. Later, however, the

number of members increased to 82. As for male members, the numbers jumped from 2 to 15. According to statistics, altogether 230 members participated in the choir over a period of time. The members had to undergo a 13-day training course, which included learning basic music theory. The course has trained two choir leaders, one conductor and one announcer.

In order to encourage more women to participate as well as to ensure the continuing effectiveness in the activities, the centre and the community chose five key members to set up a women's group. The Sisters also assisted the group to organize recreational activities, including a "yangge" [rice sprout song] dance troupe and a gong drum band. Apart from these activities, the group also holds regular meetings. They discuss proposals for activities, and take minutes of their meetings.

"In the past 20 years, the village had never organized any group activities. These training courses and activities not only enriched the lives of the villagers, they have also revived parish life," the pastor said.

2. Marriage and Family Management for the Women Left Behind

As mentioned above, since the men are the primary breadwinners, they must leave the village to work. They become migrant workers. This means that many women are left behind in the village. We have organized training workshops on marriage, family and household management; prevention of domestic violence; the defence of women's rights; and improvements in civic morality. We have invited priests (who have studied religious ethics, marriage and family) and experienced colleagues as guest speakers. These talks used the "Ten Commandments" as guiding principles, combining a code of ethics, civility and family virtues. At the same time, we introduced the reality of domestic violence, encouraging the participants to discuss the causes and results of such violence.

An 80-year-old man mentioned an incident which made a deep impression on him. He said: "In 2000, a woman in a neighboring village had tolerated domestic violence for many years, and hence bore a grudge against her husband. She eventually killed her

husband with a wooden club. And now she is in jail.” The case delivered an alarming message to the villagers. During the discussion process, the villagers not only broadened their knowledge of domestic violence, but they also suggested ways to prevent it.

3. Improvement to the School Environment and the Promotion of Education

To cater to the needs of the school, our centre renovated the library, bought more books and set up more equipment. During the summer vacation, we invited a group of university students to come to the community, and conduct a 15-day supportive teaching program. Their presence was a great encouragement to the pupils and parents of the community. They not only taught music and computer science, but they also caused the villagers, especially the primary school students, to know the world outside their community better.

Center staff paid a return visit to the community this year. When asked about the biggest change that took place in the community after the social development programs started, one of the villagers said, “The biggest change is that all of us now place great value on education. In the past, only one person could study in senior high school, but now there are eight. There are also five university students from our village, and two of them study at top universities.”

4. Elderly Care and Hospice Care

As China’s population ages rapidly, the situation of elderly persons living in rural areas is definitely worrying. Both the center and the local Church have been seeking the best ways to provide elderly care in rural areas. We have organized training programs on the common diseases of old age and on hospice care. In the meantime, we elected 16 representatives of the elderly and of women, along with chairpersons and Sisters, to form an elderly care group, to organize regular activities for the elderly. We have also helped to plan programs and to write regulations for the proper

management and operation of the group. According to the regulations, the group has to carry out 14 activities for the elderly each month, including: holding regular meetings, paying visits to the solitary elderly, providing haircuts and hair washing, taking blood pressure, house cleaning, and washing bed linens.

70-year-old Uncle He has joined the elderly visit program. He said, "We show our care for the sick and the elderly. This makes me feel happy and warm; it also makes me feel more energetic." Another old man whom we visited said, "Being a Catholic is really a good thing. It helps us to live a happy life. We have never contributed anything to the Church, but everybody comes to help me."

Some of the group members also joined the choir training program. During the training period, these members took turns to look after an old lady. Her daughter was greatly touched by this action, as she had married and lived far away from her native place. Hence she could not fulfill her filial duty as a daughter.

In this community, just as in other Catholic rural communities in Shaanxi, people have little knowledge about hospice care. They only ask the priest to administer the Sacrament of Extreme Unction, and pray for the dying person. But they neglect life and death education at an early stage. We believe that hospice care is important for the care of the elderly. In view of this, hospice care has been incorporated into our community service programs for the elderly.

5. The Construction of a Community Health Culture and the Promotion of Public Health

Healthcare services in rural communities have been severely limited for a long time. The phenomenon of "minor illness is delayed, major illness is endured, and with severe illness, one waits to die", and "the cure is more important than prevention" is very common in rural areas. In order to raise awareness about medicine and health, the centre organized a four-day campaign on health care. We also provided free medical consultation. During the campaign, 211 persons came to see the doctor. 79 of them had electrocardiogram and ultrasound diagnoses. We have distributed

207 pamphlets regarding the prevention of tuberculosis, hepatitis B and AIDS. Some medical personnel gave talks on cardiovascular and cerebrovascular diseases, which have a higher rate of incidence in this region. According to the statistics, 78 percent of the people who came to have diagnoses and consultation were elderly, women and children. Since it would take a long time to raise peoples' consciousness of good health and to fix bad habits, the women's group played an important follow-up role in the promotion of good health.

One day, when Bishop Dang Mingyan of Xi'an visited the village, he said, "Many changes have taken place in this village: the faces of the villagers are clean, and their clothes are clean; the children are lively, and their faces are obviously radiant." The parish priest, who came to the village to celebrate Mass every week, also said, "Before the project began, the villagers used to spit while talking with me, and I felt very uncomfortable about this. However, now the people spit less, and they are aware they should correct this habit."

During summer vacation, the centre organized university student volunteers to launch a campaign for health in the community. We started with changing the children's habits. The volunteers of Caritas Hong Kong prepared a series of courseware for parents and children, including "Healthy Growth Program", "Learning Through Playing", "Wisdom for Parents". The university student volunteers checked the children if they have washed up, and they asked them to brush their teeth together.

Conclusion and Reflection

Since the 1990's, the Catholic Diocese of Xi'an has launched assistance programs in the poor rural communities of Shaanxi Province. At first, the service was focused on improving the facilities in the community, i.e. to cater to the basic needs of the villagers. Since the national economy, policies and the social work sector have developed more in the last decade, our services have also undergone a drastic change. Besides catering to peoples' needs, our services are now focused on building teamwork. Being a Catholic social service agency, and having served the community

for three years, we have to ponder: What we can do now? What should we do? What is our role and what are our values?

The center is an institution foreign to the community. Since the center has to leave the area after three years of service, its role now is only that of being a companion and a facilitator. As time goes by, the community now has different demands, and it must satisfy its needs by itself. Therefore, the key role for rural social service is to make use of the resources on the local level, and to enhance the self-development of the community.

In the community, our target group was women, children and the elderly. Through different training courses, we encouraged the villagers to organize community care activities, encouraged the women to participate in community affairs, and enhanced the ability for everyone to work as a team. This was also a process of empowerment for the women's group. They started to organize their own activities, began to participate in the decision-making, and experienced personal growth. This was the most important part of the work of the helping professionals. The parish priest and the Sisters have been participating in the programs from the beginning. Being sensitive to the needs of the community, they participated in the planning and carrying out of the community care service.

"In 2012, the church in the village had to be renovated. The 340 Catholics of the village donated 90,000 RMB, and offered 70 days of hard work, which amounted to 1400 workings days altogether. The total renovation cost was 86,000 RMB", the parish priest said. Now the Catholics are very concerned with parish development, and they actively participate in the building up of the parish. It is the first of its kind in the Xi'an Diocese.

In a community where people have religious faith, the territory of the parish may be larger than that of the administrative village. The parish should take concrete action to take care of the weak, to form an atmosphere of good social morals, to lead the community to live in solidarity and fraternity with one another, and in this way show the social concern of the Church.

The center does not only provide social service in communities where the people have a religious faith. Different communities have different situations. The center provides services in these rural communities for the following reasons: the village is really very

poor; women there have a low status and a low education level; the villagers are closed to the outside world; and many children and elderly have been left behind. Therefore, we desire to improve the conditions of the community through our service.

After three years of social service work in that village, we are glad to see its effectiveness. As mentioned above, when we visited the village with the representatives of Caritas Hong Kong earlier this year, we noticed that there were fewer women. We asked the chairperson about this, and he replied, "I think the biggest change in the village in the past three years is that the villagers have broadened their knowledge. They dared not leave the village in the past, but now they do so. The women especially have realized that they too can go out to work." The women have learned to make their own decisions. They have learned that they have the ability to choose their own lifestyles

Thankfully, the Church played an important role in the holistic development of this particular rural village.