

The National Health Assembly, a way to increase community participation in health decision making

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Health is the result of dynamic and complicated relationships and deals with non-linear and non-predictable procedures. Nowadays, the health section cannot solely solve its challenges. Changing the load of diseases toward non-communicable diseases all over the world including developing countries, and the fact that development of such diseases has complicated mechanisms and is dependent on several factors made us consider the importance of doing some health based interferences in other sections more than before (1,2).

In a general view, human health depends on the improvement of situations in which an individual is born, grows up, works, and pursues his life. These situations are themselves part of the goals of sustainable development and are called social determinants of health, like healthy food and food security, suitable house, road safety, increasing physical activity and exercises, reducing air pollution, having safe cars, and reducing accidents (3). Therefore, it can be argued that to reach the goals of sustainable development, one has to pass through making healthier humans and improving human's health indicators.

Governments' views to make health undertakings in other sections have basic and fundamental roles in improving social determinants of health. Thus, the

government in Iran charges other organizations to interfere in social determinants of health by reinforcing the place of the Supreme Council of Health and its mechanisms such as national and province intersectoral workgroups and committees and holding festivals related to social factors affecting health. But if we are to experience a real evolution in health and establish a new perspective, we must increase awareness, responsibility, capability, and organized and active participation of individuals, families, and society to provide, preserve, and improve health.

If we believe in prevention prior to treatment, the first step of prevention is preventing the factors that result in dangers. In other words, we should prevent people to have risky and dangerous behaviors like smoking, low physical activity, eating salty and fatty foods, and this means changing the lifestyle. This is the individuals' primary health responsibility. When people themselves participate in health subject and collaborate with governmental and public organizations, they can better perform their responsibility regarding health; in fact, the highest level of people's participation is the ability to change their behavior and lifestyle and the attempt to help others. Our nation has long historical records of doing charity in all areas

including health. Endowing hospitals and clinics is amongst the most prominent ones. Perhaps percentage of the philanthropists' financial participation in health section, compared to the whole health sources, is not very considerable based on numerical, but it is completely valuable in making social cohesion and enhancing social capitals. Although this type of participation is valuable, it is not complete. Population participation is gained when individuals gradually become capable and are able to program and perform those plans by themselves and participate actively in regulating health policies.

There are different tools to attract people's participation in planning and policy making areas among which the health assembly is noteworthy.

Health assemblies include members of people's representatives and also selected individuals from state and non-state organizations who are established legally and usually present their suggested policies regarding important health issues to policy makers. In order to improve these assemblies, it is necessary to use different methods to obtain comments and consultations and is essential to provide documentaries related to subjects and the agendas to all the members and the public (4).

Thailand's National Health Assembly is an example of a health assembly that was established in 2007 and has held 9 meetings so far. Thailand's national health committee was responsible for holding the assembly in which at least 60% of the members were civilians. Individuals can register to attend the assembly but the committee also invites state and private organizations to attend. In addition to the national health assembly, the health assembly is held for a specific subject or it is held locally or in a province. If a subject is to be included in the assembly's agenda, it should be first presented in national health committee. Assembly's suggestions

are finally performed by the national health committee (5).

National health assembly in the Islamic Republic of Iran is regarded as a government's ratified bill in the Supreme Council of Health and based on the circular of the Ministry of Interior, all the governor generals are charged to hold the provincial health assembly with participation of people and different sections every year and reflect its accomplishments to the national health assembly. National health assembly is an opportunity to acknowledge the state sections and organizations except for the health section, and also the non-state organizations that were successful in doing effective interferences in health, and circulating the health culture in all policies. It is expected that the health assembly, composed of people's representatives, representatives of the state section, private section, and governmental agents, use all the capacities in the society to carry out its responsibility for improving public health and support the country to reach the goals of sustainable development by extending social capital.

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