

Jeevan Shakti Mela - Festival for Lifeforce

Overview and Context

The Mela (fair) for diabetes used participatory research, traditional art, interactive games, and drama in rural plains Nepal, enabling female Maithil artists from the Janakpur Women's Development Centre (JWDC) to engage with communities about Type Two Diabetes.

The project is linked to research from the Institute for Global Health. Jo Morrison, Senior Research Associate and Project lead is an expert in participatory research and is involved in cluster randomised controlled trials of community-based group interventions.

The UCL research team are writing up research about the ethical issues of participatory research with lay researchers. They are also writing up findings from the formative phase of the Mela.

Background:

Awareness about diabetes is very low in Nepal's rural areas. This engagement project targeted men and women living in a rural district of Nepal, where 40% of women are illiterate and there are strong caste and gender divisions. A local doctor in the Janakpur Zonal Hospital told artists: "People are not aware about what causes diabetes, what are its complications... they think diabetes is a fatal disease and worry that they cannot eat any of the things they enjoy... but you can eat everything, just you have to control your portions, and eat a balanced diet."

Based on this need, these aims were developed:

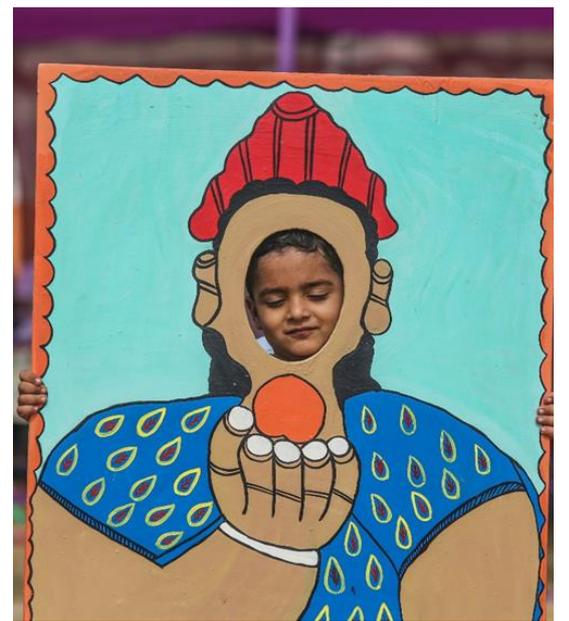
To increase knowledge and understanding of and motivation to prevent diabetes among JWDC artists and community members.

To inspire government and non-governmental organisations to use participatory approaches in developing community materials.

What happened?

The idea for a festival was developed as a Beacon Bursary application – although unsuccessful, seed funding was awarded at a UCL Focus on the Positive event, a different public engagement funding stream.

This led to discussions with the women of the Janakpur Women's Development Centre (JWDC.) They had previously created dramas and had worked with UCL researchers before – and many artists had family members with Type 2 Diabetes.



Photographer credit: Anuj Adhikari

Facts and Figures

Project was in development from **2016-2019**

The public engagement process took place over **12 months**

The Mela ran for **two days**

Over **800 visitors** were given a free blood glucose test.

The Wellcome trust Public Engagement Fund provided **£75K** towards the project

17 community performances were held in addition to the performance at the Mela

The World Health organisation estimate that **96 million people** in South East Asia are affected by diabetes

A successful Wellcome Trust public engagement grant supported the project, and a Beacon Bursary supported a pictorial consent process for research into diabetes.

In June 2018 a workshop with artists and researchers launched the engagement process. Artists were trained on qualitative research data collection methods and artists and researchers designed pictorial consent forms.

JWDC artists conducted discussions with community members, people with diabetes, health workers, and pharmacists about local understandings of diabetes. They discovered challenges including lack of affordable diabetes drugs and social stigma.

In November the diabetes festival funded by Focus on the Positive took place – piloting ideas for the Mela.

Three creative workshops were then held, developing a drama and interactive activities using traditional Mithila art. A local and a national advisory committee advised on content, quality, and reach of activities at quarterly meetings.

Working in collaboration with Relative Nepal, artists performed the drama in 17 communities of hard-to-reach groups who may be unlikely to attend the Mela – such as Muslim communities, Dalit communities, and those without public transport access.

Finally, on February 21st and 22nd the Jeevan Shakti Mela took place!

Evaluation

Afterwards there were evaluation group discussions with artists and villagers about the Mela.

A film and short illustrated briefing have been created, details are shared on the JWDC and UCL websites, and new products developed by JWDC through engagement process are now in shops in Kathmandu and being marketed online. At least two new collaborations have resulted from this work.

By the end of September 2019 there will be a dissemination programme in Kathmandu and submission of at least one publication to an academic journal. There is also possible British Council funding for JWDC to conduct some Mela activities at their ‘women of the world’ festival in November, and the team will be looking for alternate sources of funding to continue building on the success of the collaboration.

Learning from the Process

What worked well?

The engagement process enabled the development of collaborative networks for health promotion and community mobilisation initiatives.

Engagement helped develop knowledge about how to prevent and control diabetes – among artists and others who participated in the Mela.

Engagement enabled artists to be more confident to talk about diabetes, a stigmatised illness which is not often discussed.

“Uniting the artists ...and linking the art centre more with the local community and increasing their networks really had a big effect. The confidence of the artists and manager grew massively, and they were inspired to think bigger about what they could achieve” *Jo Morrison, Project Lead*

Quote from artists:

“Many languages are spoken here but art only has one language.”

“The funfair was for two days but the knowledge we accumulated will continue to be shared by us in the future.”

What could be done differently?

It is challenging to budget adequately for ‘organic’ participatory processes, and therefore building more flexibility within the budget would have been beneficial.

If this kind of activity were linked with other interventions (such as health systems strengthening, training of community health workers, or community support groups) this would respond to the increased demand for services and support after an event like the Mela, and enable the continuation of activities

Further information is available at:

[UCL Culture blog](#)

[JWDC website](#)

[Institute for Global Health](#)

[Short film](#)

[Longer film](#)