

Jeevan Shakti Mela: A public engagement process to raise awareness about type 2 diabetes in rural plains Nepal



Diabetes affects 96 million people in South-East Asia. 90% of those affected have type 2 diabetes, which can largely be prevented and controlled through a healthy diet, regular physical activity, maintaining a normal body weight and avoiding tobacco. Type 2 diabetes is not well understood in rural Nepal and a lack of information, social stigma, and cultural norms can hinder prevention.

A collaboration between the UCL Institute for Global Health, HERD International, artists from the Janakpur Women's Development Centre (JWDC), and Media for Development received funding from the Wellcome Trust to implement a public engagement process using local art to create culturally compelling health promotion and stimulate curiosity and conversation about type 2 diabetes. The process had three stages:

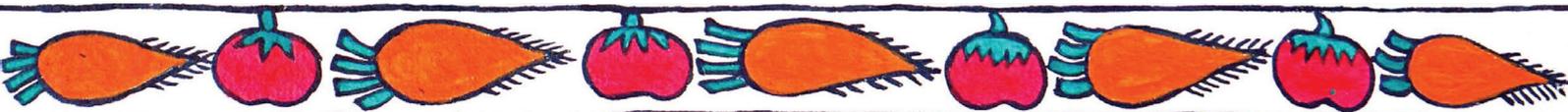
1. Participatory research

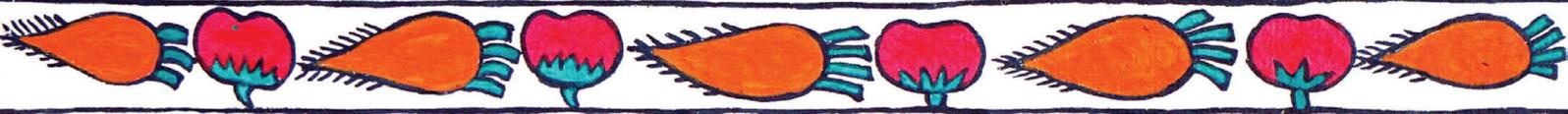
JWDC artists and researchers collaboratively planned and conducted discussions with community members, people with diabetes, health workers, and pharmacists about local understandings of diabetes, how it affects people's lives, and how it is prevented and treated. We discussed our findings, and found that stigma and financial barriers, as well as lack of knowledge, prevented care-seeking for diabetes. Artists then discussed myths and misconceptions with a local health worker who talked to them about diabetes prevention and control.



2. Creative workshops and street theatre

Building on the formative discussions, artists created traditional Maithil paintings, props, interactive displays and games for a funfair. Artists worked with a local drama group and with a local gym and yoga group to develop an exercise routine and drama. Artists made papier mache dumbbells and painted them with healthy symbols of fruits and vegetables. They began to use these in a daily exercise routine at the Centre. Artists made costumes of giant soft drink bottles, ice-creams, sugary snacks, and giant vegetables and fruits which were used in the drama. Artists performed this drama in 20 villages in rural areas to crowds of up to a 100 people.





3. Two-day fun fair in a public park

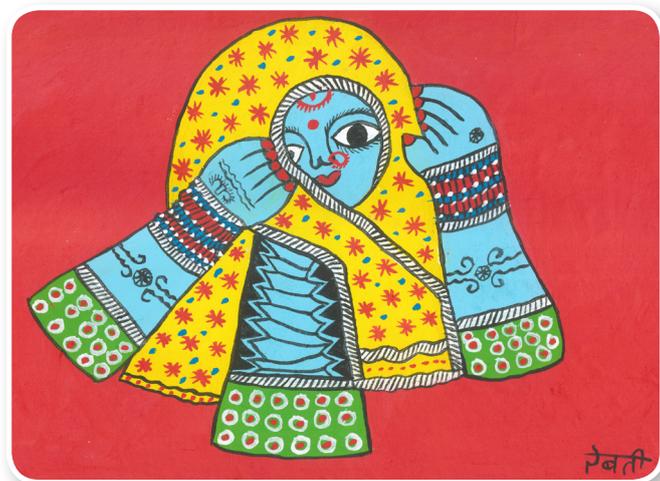
We set up the games, displays, films and a stage in a large public park in Janakpur. Artists and local school volunteers encouraged passers-by to participate, talking to them about how to prevent and control diabetes. Artists led exercise sessions and a diabetes quiz on the stage. We collaborated with Beats and Step Dance School who led the crowd in Zumba exercise to popular Hindi dance music. We had 'head in the hole' photo stands and photovoice displays where participants could listen to stories of those who were managing their diabetes. An immersion tunnel overwhelmed participants who were

attacked by giant ice-creams, cigarettes and sweets, emerging to children who had been face-painted with vegetables or dressed-up in carrot costumes. We also collaborated with a local non-governmental organisation, SEIT Nepal, the Nepal Dietician Association and Janakpur Nursing College to provide free blood glucose testing, Body Mass Index measurement and nutrition counselling for around 800 people.



We asked artists and other participants how the engagement process had affected them:

- It enabled the development of collaborative networks for health promotion and community mobilisation initiatives.
- It developed knowledge about how to prevent and control diabetes.
- It made them take-up exercise and become more conscious of what they ate.
- It enabled them to be more confident to talk about diabetes, a stigmatised illness which is not often discussed.
- It enabled a discovery among some that they were at risk of diabetes, and they were grateful for the chance to address that risk.



Artists in particular were affected:

- They worked as a team, instead of in their separate sections, and enjoyed working with a common purpose.
- They overcame their fears of public performance in a patriarchal society where women are prevented from moving around freely, and expected to behave in a demure and deferential manner.
- They were able to advise friends and family about how to prevent and control diabetes with confidence, despite often being uneducated.

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