INTERVIEW : VALÉRIE SCHMITT-DIABATÉ



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THE ROLE OF MUTUAL HEALTH ORGANIZATIONS IN THE EXTENSION OF SOCIAL SECURITY

The interview took place at the Second Mutual Meetings, on 20 and 21st November 2007, in Marseilles, France. The film of the interview can be found in Youtube <u>here.</u>

We are at the Second Mutual Meetings and the International Labour Office is attending for the first time, I think to present a particular project.

Valérie: Indeed, we have come in the context of the workshop entitled "Mutual organization members of all countries, Unite!" We want to explain what the ILO is doing, and in particular its STEP Programme. We are working on the extension of social security in developing countries, where, generally speaking, 80 per cent of the population has no health cov erage.

So we are talking mainly about the countries of the South?

Valérie : Yes, Africa, Latin America and Asia. The objective of the STEP Programme is to support certain



initiatives, notably in the area of the mutual health organizations, from technical and political

standpoints. We are working in different countries, either with teams in place or by developing partnerships.

Just now I was talking to a lady who works in the Ministry of Health in Burkina Faso who was telling me that they have a substantial public health problem, because at least 80 per cent of the population have no sickness coverage. She thought that the mutual system was the only solution for her country, since the State does not have the means to finance this social coverage.

Valérie: Yes, in those countries it is initiatives by civil society that enable progress to be made in this area. I am thinking of mutual organizations, cooperatives and others (these initiatives may take different forms). The challenge today is to support the development of these systems, and above all to integrate them into a national strategy for the exten-sion of social security so as to ensure that there is a certain coherence between

initiatives. At the round-table, the lady you were talking about stressed the importance of the regulation of mutual organizations. This is particularly relevant because it raises all the problems of the commitment of the State to the process of extending social security. After the initiatives by civil society therefore, we are witnessing a real political awareness on the need of extending social security. But for worldwide coverage more is needed, namely, legislation, perhaps management centres of the kind that lady was speaking about, in order to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the systems. It is also essential to work on the provision of care. This requires the setting-up of partnerships, improving the quality of supply, or simply acting to ensure that a supply is available. In these countries, the supply of public care is deficient; in other words, health centres exist, but the staff is not always available, or there is a shortage of medicines. And so we have to work in the same time on the organization and solvency of the demand –the user demand, and also on the supply.

Finance is another important question because in countries where a lot of people live on less than a dollar a day, it is not possible to finance social security with user contributions alone. So redistribution mechanisms will have to be set up at the country level, through cross-contributions between the richer and poorer sectors of the population, or for countries like Burkina Faso where the rich sector is very small, international solidarity mechanisms will have to be set up. It is there, for example, that the French mutual system can have a role to play. The purpose of the round-table was to explain needs and to understand what is at stake. At the political level, the international community is learning that there is a need to extend health insurance in these countries, and in that community, the mutual system has a role to play in developing international solidarity. This is a crucial problem because healthis a public asset, and it is essential that everybody should have access to health insurance.

The French mutual system has great expertise in the management and setting-up of schemes, expertise from which these countries could benefit. That person from Burkina Faso for example, was very eager to have technical support too, and she wanted to know whether in French mutual organizations there are training centres, and whether there are people who would pass on their expertise.

Is there a demand for training?

Valérie: Yes, training, practical technical support for an on-site project, adapted to the context, which is different and covering the important questions while at the same time providing expertise.

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Within the STEP Programme, will you deal with all these problems? How do you respond?

Valérie : We have various methods of action. In West Africa, in five countries, we are working directly in the field, providing technical and political support. We are supporting mutual health organizations and mutual networks, we are developing arguments to convince the State that the extension of social security is a priority and that it should be included as a genuine element in budget plans. We really act at different levels. In countries where there is less of a need for technical support, we act through established networks and support advocacy. To that end, we are trying to put the various actors in touch with each other, because we think that certain activities in Colombia or India for example, may be useful for other countries, such as Senegal, Cambodia or Laos. So we are trying to document the experiences which seem to us to be interesting, so that the information is shared as widely as possible, and to encourage partnerships or exchanges of ideas.

The job seems enormous. Are you optimistic about the idea that these countries can succeed?

Valérie: Certainly! In Colombia it has succeeded What is needed is a subtle mixture of political will, financial resources, the existence or setting-up of civil-society movements, and the progressive development of onsite expertise. There are many examples of where this has worked. Colombia, in 15 years, has covered 80 per cent of the poor population through a linked system, that is regulated and subsidized by the State and mainly managed by mutual organizations (they have 60 per cent of the market). There are also countries like India where cooperatives have developed systems covering millions of people.

And all that is based on solidarity? Everybody pays, regardless of the risk?

Valérie: Yes, absolutely ! Even if different models emerge. We are very optimistic. But there are countries where things are going more quickly, and others where they are going more slowly... (chuckles)

Lastly I should like to add that for all these purposes we are developing internet platforms, which constitute one of our tools.

Ah yes, and this brings us back to the point that information is important...

Valérie : Especially since our platforms are very cooperative. We rely on networks of actors, and we have partners in different countries who can create pages or set up discussion and exchange forums.

Thank you.

{Interview transcribed by Olivier Arnaud-Fréaud, ILO / STEP, Geneva, Switzerland}