



Community Radio Project Challenges Traditional Practices in Malawi and Other Countries to Promote HIV Prevention

Funded by SADC HIV and AIDS Fund

The Southern African Development Community (SADC) is a 15-country intergovernmental organisation established in 1992. Its purpose is to enhance the development and economic growth of Southern Africa, alleviate poverty, and improve the standard and quality of life of the region's people through regional integration. SADC further seeks to promote coordination and cooperation between national and regional strategies and programmes.

The SADC HIV and AIDS Fund supports short-term research and interventions by government and civil society partners that: expand or complement existing programmes; involve three or more countries across a number of sectors; and are cost effective. The projects are endorsed by Ministries of Health and national AIDS authorities.

Background

A cultural tradition practiced in parts of Malawi, called the “hyena practice,” is contributing to the spread of HIV and AIDS. Based on the belief that a family that does not have children is not a proper family, village elders come together to select a relative of the husband to make his wife pregnant. The man is allowed to sneak into the home at night like a hyena. The wife is thus exposed to unprotected sex which both infringes on her rights and increases the risk of HIV transmission. While this tradition is considered outdated in some parts of Malawi, it is practiced in Mvungo village of Lilongwe District.

“A family without children is like no family at all. That is why our forefathers made sure that every household has a child, by introducing the practice of ‘hyena’ to afford a family a child without embarrassing them by exposing their infertility. This practice also ensures that the child still carries the family blood, because the man assigned to assist is usually drawn from the affected husband’s family,” said Village Headman Chitukula.

Intervention

With funding from the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC), through its HIV and AIDS Fund, the Panos Institute Southern Africa (PSAf) implemented the Communicating HIV Prevention in Southern Africa project in six countries (Angola, Lesotho, Malawi, Swaziland, Zambia, and Mozambique) from 2012 to 2013. A variety of HIV-related topics were addressed in each country, including male circumcision, prevention of mother-to-child transmission (PMTCT), multiple concurrent partners (MCP), and traditional practices (see Table 1). The project used community-led discussions to challenge traditional beliefs, practices, attitudes, and behaviours that are barriers to effective HIV prevention. A key project activity was the formation of community groups, called “Radio Listening Clubs” (RLC), at which cultural traditions, such as the hyena practice, were discussed.



Recording for a community radio station

Communicating HIV Prevention in Southern Africa

Country	Topics Covered	Estimated Reach
Angola	HIV prevention awareness, MCP, PMTCT, sexual minorities	78,090
Lesotho	MCP, PMTCT	10,046
Malawi	PMTCT, MCP, stigma and discrimination, HIV prevention awareness, male circumcision, traditional practices	390,000
Mozambique	PMTCT, stigma and discrimination, HIV prevention awareness	97,600
Swaziland	HIV prevention awareness, male circumcision, PMTCT, MCP, HIV testing and counseling (HTC)	15,300
Zambia	MCP, male circumcision, PMTCT, HIV prevention awareness, traditional practices, HTC	199,900

The RLCs allowed community members to learn about and reflect on the HIV transmission risks associated with such practices and to identify alternatives to reduce risk. For example, in many Southern African countries, a form of adoption is practiced whereby a couple may take care of and rear a relative's children, to help lessen their economic burden. The RLCs also discussed the importance of couples seeking services from infertility clinics, to obtain a concrete medical diagnosis to pinpoint the cause of infertility.

The RLC discussions were recorded and then aired on local community radio stations. The radio station would bring in an expert to address some of the technical questions on the radio, thereby increasing the community members' understanding of the risks involved with a traditional practice. This enabled the community members to listen to expert views, and further discuss the issues emerging from the programmes.



Recording for a community radio station

Results

Participation in the RLCs empowered community members, especially women, to freely express themselves and to constructively talk about HIV and how the hyena practice has affected them. The RLCs gave community members an opportunity to identify local solutions. Although the hyena practice has not been eliminated, community members have an increased understanding of how it contributes to HIV transmission.

“It is not always easy to challenge the traditions of the community. However, these discussions have helped us appreciate how some traditional practices fuel HIV infection, and that as a community we can work together to address this,” said Michael Banda, a member of the RLC.

The community discussions also influenced traditional leaders to engage with community members on issues related to customs and traditions. For example, Headman Chitukula said: **“Our traditions and culture is what builds us and makes us a community different from the next community. However, through the RLC discussions we have realized how some of these cultural and traditional practices put us at a disadvantage especially in this era of HIV and AIDS.”**

The experience in Mvugo village demonstrates the power of open engagement and dialogue, which can lead to positive changes in attitudes and practices, and ultimately the reform of cultural practices that impede HIV prevention and impact human rights.

Panos Institute Southern Africa is a regional communications for development organization which works to amplify the voices of the poor and marginalized to drive their own development. PSAf focuses on amplifying the voices of the poor and marginalized by: using innovative communication approaches; working with mainstream and alternative media; interfacing with development actors and local communities; and providing platforms for informed debate and voice.

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