

EMPOWERING COMMUNITIES IN THE FACE OF HIV AND AIDS THROUGH STEPPING STONES AND REFLECT (STAR) APPROACH

The experiences of CENPERD NGO Lafia-Nigeria

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Introduction

- Centre for Peace and Rural Development (CENPERD NGO) is a NGO based in Lafia Nigeria.
- Established in 1999 in response to the growing violence among youth as well as the rising incidences of HIV/AIDS in Nasarawa state.

Target population

- Women
- Youth
- PLWHA and PABA
- Policy makers

Key messages

- Care and support for PLWHA
- Support for VCCT
- BCC
- Home based care

Methodology

- Community mobilization
- Home base care
- Training on participatory approach
- Lobbying and Advocacy
- Networking

Background

- Nasarawa: located in the north central zone of Nigeria, latitude 70 and 90 N and longitude 70 and 10 E and shares boundary with the federal capital territory Abuja
- Population of 1.7 million.
- Major occupation is farming and trading.
- Made up of 13 LGA's; heterogeneous in nature with over 30 ethnic groups and languages. Ethnic rivalry
- 2003 national HIV sero-prevalence survey, 6.5% of the population is HIV positive,
- National average stands 5.0% with Nigeria having the highest number of PLWHA in sub-Saharan Africa with the exception of South Africa.

Background cont'd

- Anecdotal evidence in State suggests that five of every ten people that are screened for HIV/AIDS, test positive to the virus.
- A cumulative number of deaths due to HIV/AIDS in the state stands at 37,248 in the year 2003.

PROJECT OVERVIEW

- STAR project works in 2 LGA's comprising of 10 communities (Dadin Kowa, Alwaza, Kwandere, Shabu, Andasime, Ashige, Gidan Buba, Wakwa, Angwan Aku and Doka)
- Overall goal of piloting an innovative approach to individual and community empowerment in the face of HIV.
- STAR premised on the context that the population most vulnerable to HIV/AIDS has the least access to education
- Limited funding at present available for education programmes in Africa (EFA monitoring Report 2003/4).

Who is participating in STAR ?

- CENPERD NGO
- Comic Relief UK,
- Actionaid International
- PAMOJA
- 10 local communities
- Women
- Youth

What are we looking at in the process of empowering people?

- Enabling people to use a range of participatory tools to explore wider impact of HIV/AIDS on all aspect of life.
- Enabling people to take part in action and decision making beyond the interpersonal and household levels.
- Building peoples confidence and skills to deal with sensitive issues such as death and sex.
- Providing guidance on how to build communication skills including literacy and numeracy
- Enables people to take action and decision making beyond the interpersonal and household spheres
- Recognizing that men and women each need private time and space with their peers to explore their own needs and concerns about relationships and sexual health.
- Using STAR as an “enabler”, a means to an end, a journey not a destination to crystallizing community action in the fight against HIV and AIDS.

Roadmap: community empowerment through STAR

- **Baseline survey**
- ✓ High denial in most communities about the existence of people living with AIDS.
- ✓ High level of stigma for PLWHA in most of the communities
- ✓ Low income capacity
- ✓ Absence of community structure/mechanism to support PLWHA
- ✓ High percentage of the existence of Community associations and Groups but none specifically devoted to HIV/AIDS interventions.
- ✓ Main beneficiary of HIV/AIDS information are men and youths
- ✓ Complete absence of any government coordinating body at community level in relation to HIV/AIDS interventions
- ✓ Complete ignorance of any government policies and statutory guidelines in relation to HIV/AIDS at the community level.
- **Selection and Training of facilitators**
- **Formation of STAR circles**
- **Community meetings**
- **Action planning and advocacy**

Successes

- An increased in demand in 3 communities for literacy classes presently targeting over 50 out school married youth and women Alwaza, Dadin Kowa, and Ashige communities.
- Transformation of some of the circles into CBO who are in the process of access grants for State SPT/world bank project.
- Increased membership of PLWHA support group in Doma,
- Formation of micro credit group amongst facilitators and other circle members to
- Help with income generation. This has helped in the economic empowerment of
- Enhanced community cohesion as community now see the need to come together and discuss pertinent community issues regardless of political affiliations and ethnic backgrounds.
- Women and men sit down together in their circles to discuss community issues together-shattering the hitherto taboo that men and women could not sit together to do so .
- Active community involvement and participation in rehabilitating access roads in the community.

Outcome cont'd

- Introduction of monthly environmental and health sanitation in communities like Doma. As a result of this initiative in Dadin Kowa community, the local government authority has introduced a monthly sanitation exercise in the local government area.
- Greater awareness raising on HIV and AIDS in the 10 STAR communities, a major achievement here is the increasing linkages made by facilitators in Dadin Kowa where orphans and PLWHA have been lined with the existing support group in the area.
- Increased in the number of people opting for HIV testing where an average of 4 people out of 8 that come for testing are HIV positive.

Voices from Below

- *There was so much fear in this community about HIV, but this thing(STAR Meetings) that started a joke but people within a short time have been able to come out and say I am HIV Positive because now they know there is support for them, I have a daughter who is HIV positive, today I am confident that there's hope because of the support she gets from family members and the group that meets regularly.- Mallam Hussieni 56yrs, Community Leader, Dadin Kowa*
- *Before my husband did want me to attend the meetings, but when the women started having the Adult literacy classes, he saw the need for me to attend and now, attending the community meeting is much easily because he has seen the improvement in my live.....there is a lot of discussion about HIV/AIDS . Aisha Abdullahi 25yrs, House wife and mother of 6 children*

Challenges

- Inadequate funding for refresher training and for other capacity building activities
- Maintaining level of commitment and coordination especially at community level
- Difficulty in getting Government to respond to community issues.
- Meeting spaces, most of the meetings are done in “homes” of either facilitators, traditional leaders or other places, which in themselves are not bad, but often this makes it difficult for other community members wanting to join do so.
- Inadequate funds to follow up community intervention
- Farming activities
- Documentation of Processes at the community
- Securing funding form other projects to carry out action points
- Non-chalant attitude of some community leaders

Lessons learnt

- HIV/AIDS can be a uniting force bringing a hitherto divided community together to fighting the disease
- Transparency and communication are key when working with local groups
- The projects emphasis on context specific strategic to fighting HIV and AIDS
- Cross learning initiatives should be kept in might backed with appropriate budgets
- The process of community mobilization is critical before the start of a STAR process
- Active involvement of some of the community and religious leaders in the STAR process has motivated other community members to be actively involved in discussions

Lesson learnt cont'd

- The involvement of traditional rulers through advocacy visits, adds to the acceptability of the whole idea by the people.
- Good facilitators and facilitation skill is a key factor to achieving a successful analysis of the factors that lead people to being vulnerable to HIV and AIDS.
- Community people did not know that they have the capacity to initiate actions to solve their problems until they are motivated
- The STAR process has exposed the people to the right information on some of the root causes of HIV thereby setting the stage for behavior change.
- People lack knowledge about their basic rights as citizens and so can hardly be pro active in the pursuit of their development goals.

Sustainability

- More engagement with government at the local level
- Support existing groups to form CBO's and local coalitions on HIV/AIDS