

outcome HIGHLIGHTS



Community conversation in Cholkassa village, southern Ethiopia.

Photo: Mirgissa Kaba

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Learning via community conversations

HIV prevention among Ethiopian pastoralists

In brief

- Community conversations proved a valuable tool to help pastoralists identify sources of HIV risk and jointly develop strategies to counteract the dangers
- By adapting to the local culture and training community members in communication methods, an awareness-raising project empowered residents and effectively conveyed its messages
- It helped to strengthen HIV prevention at the community level, directly benefitting 5,000 participants, and reached a wider, national audience via media reports



Research featured here was conducted in Ethiopia

HIV/AIDS is one of Ethiopia's greatest public health concerns. While HIV/AIDS risk awareness is high among urban men and women, surveys have shown that people living in remote pastoral communities are poorly informed, particularly about methods of prevention like condoms.

Borena, in southern Ethiopia, is one such community. Five years ago, local leaders held a brief discussion on HIV/AIDS at a public assembly. However, there was no follow-up action, and little was done to address *Jaala-Jaalto* – extramarital sexual relations – a practice that was allegedly common in the community.

Researcher Mirgissa Kaba, a native of Ethiopia, began studying the frequency of extramarital relationships in the community and its possible consequences for the spread of HIV. Kaba eventually used his findings to improve locals' awareness of HIV/AIDS and introduce methods of prevention.

Tailoring information

Kaba's research confirmed that extramarital relationships were indeed common and that the practice was

culturally tolerated. This, of course, raised concerns about HIV/AIDS. Did people know about it? Were they doing anything to protect themselves? In discussions with community members, Kaba found that people were uncertain of the risks. This was largely due to a lack of culturally appropriate HIV/AIDS information campaigns: most such campaigns were designed centrally, usually in an urban context, and failed to address the specific local context. Spreading a simplistic message about how important it is "to remain faithful to one's partner" would have little effect in Borena, says Kaba. Community members observed that local leaders continued to have multiple partnerships, casting doubt in their minds as to the seriousness of the threat of HIV/AIDS.

Community conversations

Finding no evidence of strategies to avoid HIV transmission in the community, Kaba applied for funding of a PAMS project (see box) to implement in collaboration with the international humanitarian organisation, GOAL. The project employed a locally well-established, culturally accepted method of communication – community dialogues – to convey



Photo: Mirgissa Kaba

The AIDS in Ethiopia report of 2006 estimated the overall prevalence of HIV in Ethiopia at 3.5%, with urban areas (10.5%) displaying a higher prevalence than rural areas (1.9%). Yet some rural districts, such as Moyale (5.1%) in Borena, the region featured here, displayed alarmingly high rates of prevalence (all figures from 2005).

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information on HIV/AIDS to the public. It involved conducting many conversations with community members and, on a larger scale, facilitating “consensus-building forums”, public discussions in which people raise issues of concern and seek to build a consensus on how to address them.

In a first, capacity-building step, 38 people from different villages were selected to become “facilitators in community conversation”. Chosen for certain qualities – such as their level of education and their status in the community – the facilitators were trained by GOAL, together with the Oromia HIV Prevention and Control Office. For three months, weekly discussions were held in six different villages – Dharito, Harwayu, Katte, Cholkassa, Bule Korma, and Makanissaa. The discussions focused on identifying factors that make the community vulnerable to HIV transmission; prevention mechanisms; and the need to support those affected by the virus.

During the conversations, some community members continued to insist that HIV/AIDS did not exist in Borena. To counter this, two people living with HIV/AIDS were invited to speak about their experiences, assisted by health workers. They emphasised the following messages:

no one is immune to HIV; the virus is found everywhere; it is transmitted by sexual contact; and this is how to prevent its spread.

The project also featured a cultural “edutainment” session, including music with messages on HIV/AIDS and a quiz competition with HIV-related questions prepared by regional health offices.

HIV prevention

More than 600 people – half of them women – registered and routinely participated in the community conversations. Up to 5,000 people participated in the consensus-building forums. The project was even documented and aired on Ethiopian national television, spreading its message to a much wider audience.

Kaba’s research found that, at least in the short term, the practice of extra-marital relationships is unlikely to change. As such, it is crucial to communicate the risks of HIV through culturally accepted channels – enlisting the support of local leaders – and ensure the availability and affordability of condoms. Responding to a request by Kaba, the NGO DKT Ethiopia provided 10,000 condoms free of charge to the community. Efforts are underway to institutionalise the provision of condoms in the area.

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Further reading

Kaba M. In preparation [2011]. Community conversation as a tool to enhance HIV intervention: Practical lessons from interventions in Borena. Manuscript available from Mirgissa Kaba.

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Outcome Highlights feature

effective collaborations between researchers, policymakers, practitioners, and local communities in the NCCR North-South network.

Partnership Actions for Mitigating Syndromes (PAMS)

are pilot projects designed to test NCCR North-South research in real-world settings. Developed jointly by researchers and local stakeholders, they aim to promote mutual learning and reveal paths to sustainability.

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