

Community participation in the fight to end HIV/AIDS in Africa

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KEY MESSAGES

Communities must be at the center of every aspect in the fight against HIV/AIDS: They must be involved in all aspects of partnering to prevention, treatment, and care service. Advocacy begins with the community in order to mobilize resources and to engage and involve key populations in the process toward an AIDS free Africa.

HIV testing and treatment services need to be more inclusive of the “treat-all” concept, with increased responsiveness to the needs of people living with HIV (PLHIV).

Communities must also be at the forefront of research to identify barriers to accessing services.

INTRODUCTION

Community engagement is imperative for linking those who are in need of receiving HIV prevention methods as well as treatment services. Adolescent girls and young women, for example, remain one of the most vulnerable groups. Not only do they bear a higher rate of HIV infections, but they also bear a disproportionate global disease burden, and often face intersecting health, social, cultural, and economic challenges.

Discrimination and stigma can be diminished if communities-aid in ensuring vulnerable groups are able to freely access prevention, testing, and treatment services.

The 20th International Conference for AIDS and STIs in Africa (ICASA 2019), a Community Engagement Village, was offered a space for conversations and experience sharing, among conference participants.

The Village served as an opportunity for different to introduce, implement, and advocate for effective evidence-informed HIV/AIDS and STI interventions in their communities, countries, and regions. Key populations, including sex workers, transgender people, people who inject drugs, and incarcerated people, were able to utilize the forum to also discuss related important issues, advocacy strategies, and their desired responses toward the end of AIDS.

COMMUNITY MOBILIZATION

Various communities must then be fully involved in the planning, implementation, and ownership of interventions to support health programs and to enact an effective response. Community strengths must be recognized as an asset in order to target the needs of key populations as well as to showcase the importance of such populations in awareness and prevention materials. Incorporating key populations’ needs into a setting, health programs and policies are essential to recognizing gaps in

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the delivery of health services and measuring outcomes.

COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT

Creating an environment in which communities lead responses and have their opinions considered in HIV implementation, strategies could be one effective approach to address cultural and social norms which promote stigma and myths. Addressing community needs is therefore important to mobilizing resources and to encouraging strong participation and collaboration. It is then paramount to empower community members and involve them in decision making processes.

CONCLUSION

Despite achievements made in the fight against HIV/AIDS, focus on vulnerable groups in achieving national and global targets in the fight against the epidemic is still missing.

From conversations held at the Community Engagement Village, the need for better-coordinated approaches to strengthen community engagement and participation, and to leverage collaboration between community members, governments, and the private sector was strongly emphasized.

Providing key populations health services in an open environment is essential for those who abstain from care (due to stigma) and treatment over fear to feel safe and accepted.

