

Assessing community sensitization approaches in low-resource, high-HIV-prevalence settings: who are we reaching, who are we missing?

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Background: As policy-makers encourage integration of HIV and primary health care services, sensitization activities are critical for facilitating information dissemination, fostering community engagement and trust, and ultimately promoting ownership of HIV services. We examine discrepancies in access to sensitization messages using basic data collected during outreach activities for the integration of HIV and non-HIV services in two clinics in Lusaka.

Methods: Three sensitization approaches were used including: 1) meetings between project and District officials and neighborhood health committees (NHCs); 2) daily health talks incorporating information about integration, delivered by lay or professional staff to patients attending the clinic, and 3) community-based drama performances. Data on meetings were recorded in minutes and NHC reports; clinic registers were used to record number and content of health talks and clinic attendance; and data on the location, weather conditions, total number, age (adult/child), and sex of the audience were routinely collected by the project coordinator or troupe leader at drama performances.

Results: Four pre-integration NHC meetings (2/clinic) resulted in 168 community leaders (50% men) receiving information to disseminate to their catchment zones. 32 drama performances (16/catchment) reached 16,334 people. Attendance was higher among females (n=7838, 48%) and children (n=6080, 37%) versus males (n=2416, 15%) and afternoon performances were better attended (n=9854, 60%) than morning sessions. In the three-month period following integration, both clinics recorded 2-3 daily health talks incorporating information on integration, in total reaching 3975 women, 3070 children and 1311 men.

Conclusion: Drama performances and clinic-based health talks have the potential to reach large numbers compared to NHC meetings. However, proportionally fewer men were the direct recipients of messages in both these activities. Planners should carefully consider socio-demographic or geographic factors and develop and monitor strategic approaches to ensure direct access by all community members rather than select activities that simply reach large numbers.