

Community Voices in Uganda

Empowering Community in HIV Prevention: When a dilemma empowers you to change behavior Targeting what has been described as the most at risk populations, communities along the northern transport corridor in Uganda are now engaged in a community driven intervention to tame the spread of HIV infection. This intervention duped “Community Voices in Uganda” has generated immense interest from both the host communities and stakeholders who now say it is one of the most innovative strategies to prevention of HIV infection in the recent times. The “Community Voices in Uganda” Project is a partnership between Energy Institute of Uganda (EIU) and Family Health International with financial support from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID/REDSO) under the Regional Outreach to Address HIV and AIDS through Developmental Strategies (ROADS) project implemented in the East and Central African countries. The project whose purpose is to stem HIV and AIDS transmission and mitigate its impact for transport workers and the people living along the northern transport corridor, targets two boarder towns of Busia on the Kenyan Boarder, Katuna on the Rwanda/Uganda boarder and two inland truck stops of Naluwerere in Bugiri district and Lyantonde (formerly under Rakai district). The pilot project phase commenced on 1st September 2006 and ended on 31st August 2007 and made remarkable strides in achieving its objectives of; increasing knowledge of HIV and AIDS and preventive strategies that reduce personal risk of infection; increasing uptake of available prevention and care services; and increasing involvement, and resources of the private sector in HIV and AIDS programming. The success of the project was realized through its creative strategy of engaging the community in monthly dialogue about typical predicament or dilemma around HIV. In this strategy, community members are invited to discuss the predicament and suggest solutions to the dilemma. This stimulates quality dialogue from both young and old culminating with a prize giving session to participants with outstanding or best solutions to the dilemma. The word Dilemma has in the process become a household name in these communities who keep asking for what and when the next dilemma will be so that they can research for solutions. It is common to find community members consulting widely for these solutions as soon as a dilemma scenario is publicized. Of great interest in its twelve months of its implementation, the project reached 25,825 people with HIV risk awareness and preventive messages through 313 peer education sessions and 32 BCC events. 38,177 IEC/BCC materials were developed and distributed, 78,344 condoms were distributed. Other behavioral communications were conducted through showing HIV/AIDS/STIs related videos, referrals to service providers and a guest speaker on HIV/AIDS issues after BCC events which culminated into question to answer sessions .A team of 44 competently trained peer facilitators by PATH were the major inspiration behind this success. Another reason for success has been increased participation and resources from key oil companies that are members of EIU. These include Shell, Caltex, Total, Kobil and Eskom (U) limited who have supported sustaining the interest and participation of community members in these events, through donation of prizes given during the monthly community dialogue on the dilemma. This has greatly helped in increasing the involvement and resources of the private sector in supporting HIV prevention interventions. Other support has come from The Friends of Christ Ministries (FOCREV) in Busia, Uganda Reproductive Health Bureau in Naluwerere, The Ministry of Health Hospital in Lyantonde and the AIDS Information Centre (AIC) in Kabale, who have enabled free HIV counseling and testing to be conducted at these project sites during the monthly dilemma day events otherwise known as Behavior Change Communication (BCC) events. The above support enabled the project to be successfully implemented as one of the most innovative strategy of reaching the hard-to-reach and most-at-risk populations with HIV counseling and testing. This has been through conducting the HIV counseling and testing sessions from late afternoons to late into the night in an effort to catch truck drivers, commercial sex workers and other nocturnal travelers. The project has gained valuable experiences that will be used in planning future direction. The official launch of the project took place on the 25th of July, 2007 at Katuna which was also a major opportunity to highlight these good practices. The end of the pilot year paved way for the second year project period which started in 1st October 2007 and runs to 31st September 2008. The program will be extended to cover Malaba, Rubare (Ntungamo district) and Mbiko in Mukono district. Besides prevention, the program will include the youth outreaches mainly in theatre and HIVAIDS support through trained volunteer peer counselors.