

IMPROVING COMMUNITY HIV PREVENTION: CHOOSING THE RIGHT *ACTIVISTAS*

The Challenge: *Activistas* are the Linchpin of Interventions, and Getting the Right People is Critical

The Capable Partners Program (CAP) in Mozambique, implemented by FHI 360, supported civil society organizations in the fight against HIV/AIDS. As one of its activities, CAP provided grants to Mozambican organizations to facilitate interactive sessions for various target groups they served in order to reduce the risk of HIV infection. These sessions—participatory debates focusing on a variety of HIV/AIDS prevention themes—were managed by *activistas* (facilitators) who were recruited and trained by the CAP Partner organizations.

In their initial work carrying out social and behavior change communication (SBCC) interventions, many CAP Partners believed that it was sufficient to recruit as *activistas* any individuals able to speak the local language of the communities in which they would be working. The selection process was often given secondary importance in the program. There was a common misconception that anyone could be trained to carry out requirements of the role. This resulted in a lack of attention being paid to selecting appropriate individuals.

However, the success of Partner SBCC interventions hinged upon the ability of these *activistas* to effectively engage the target audience in thoughtful

Debates, Film, and Theater as a Path toward Change

The CAP Mozambique-funded interventions were designed to spur tough conversations that can lead to real behavior change. Group discussions on challenging topics (sexual behavior, women's rights, and domestic violence) can increase knowledge, allow for the exchange of different points of view, and change attitudes. Talking about these sensitive topics—as opposed to simply receiving information—strengthens self-efficacy among participants to overcome silence and speak to their spouses and partners about using condoms and/or limiting the number of sexual partners.

Strengthening Capacities for Improved HIV/AIDS Impact

CAP Mozambique was funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR). It was designed to strengthen the capacity of leading Mozambican organizations to contribute to the fight against HIV/AIDS and gender-based violence. From 2006–2016, CAP Mozambique integrated intensive capacity development of its Partners with grants to provide the organizations with opportunities to apply what they learned and demonstrate their capacities to affect HIV/AIDS at the community level. CAP Mozambique not only supported technical capacity, but also addressed organizational structures and systems, including financial and administrative systems and governance.

discussions about HIV/AIDS—which frequently included addressing highly sensitive and controversial issues. CAP Partners did not initially see the link between the role of the *activista* and the successful implementation of the project.

Recruiting the wrong individuals also had the potential over the long run to affect the credibility of organizations in their target communities.

To be effective, *activistas* for SBCC interventions needed the capacity to identify with the target group, understand the target group (its challenges and barriers to reducing risk), use clear and understandable language to transmit messages in a way that will be heard, interact effectively with the target group, maintain the interest of the group in the subject matter, and navigate relationships within the group. The practice of recruiting *activistas* based on basic language requirements (and often, family connections with project staff), meant that individuals recruited at first were often not skilled or appropriate. A few problems included:

- **Married adults (*activistas*) facilitating sessions with youth**—In such cases, the vast difference in age, life experience, and marital status hindered communication between *activistas* and participating youth. The language used by the *activistas* to transmit messages was also not that commonly used by teenagers. At times, adults took an authoritarian stance in presenting material. For example, when discussing the link between alcohol use and HIV/AIDS, an adult *activista* might gloss over the issue by saying, “Of course you can’t use alcohol; you are kids.” The teenagers in these sessions quickly became bored and disengaged from the activity.

- **Youth (*activistas*) facilitating sessions with youth in the same age group**—

Youth recruited for this role did not feel comfortable—due to both their lack of capacity and lack of life experience—in addressing the questions raised by their peers during sessions. The participants also had a tendency to ‘test’ the *activistas* to see if they really understood and were ‘in charge’ of a particular topic. Eventually, many of these *activistas* abandoned their work because they were unable to interact effectively with their groups.

The Solution: Clear Criteria and a Transparent Selection Process

Through monitoring and technical assistance visits with Partners, CAP identified the lack of a clear recruitment process for *activistas* to be a primary cause of the ineffectiveness of these prevention interventions. CAP asked its Partners to share their *activista* selection criteria and developed a general *Activista* Profile based on all of the ideas submitted.

This model was shared with all Partners, further input was provided, and a final *Activista* Profile was distributed. Organizations then used this as a general guideline and adapted it to meet the specific requirements of their individual projects. Partners also worked with community leaders to identify people who met the criteria within the target communities.

CAP Partners also used the new *Activista* Profile to assess the *activistas* currently working on their projects, and in some cases shifted *activistas* from one target group to another to ensure a more appropriate match. In some cases Partners decided to dismiss individuals who were not appropriate for their interventions.

The Results: Increased Attendance and Improved Quality of Prevention Sessions

Due to the process of jointly developing an *Activista* Profile and the provision of ongoing technical assistance to existing and new Partners on the importance of careful recruitment of *activistas*, CAP Partners gained a clear understanding of the link between behavior change and the role of *activistas* in helping such change come about. CAP saw an improvement in the quality of prevention sessions facilitated, greater openness between and among the *activistas* and participants in the debate sessions, and increased attendance at the sessions. As a result, Partners were better able to meet their overall prevention targets and had confidence that they were reaching individuals through quality interventions.¹

This emphasis on selecting the right people for their respective roles in the organization became a theme throughout the organizational capacity development that CAP Mozambique facilitated with all of its Partners. Partners learned to develop profiles and job descriptions for all staff and Board Members and to use these as guides in choosing the right candidates for jobs and in evaluating their performance.

Document written in 2013 and updated in 2016.



ACTIVISTA FROM N'WETI FACILITATING COMMUNITY DEBATE. (FHI 360)

¹ The Prevention End line Survey conducted in July 2014 of 1531 men and women in targeted communities confirmed the effectiveness of CAP Partner interventions in influencing attitudes and behaviors linked to HIV, gender inequality, and gender-based violence (GBV). See: CAP Mozambique HIV Prevention End Line Report. March 2015. Johannesburg and Maputo: Health Info-Matrix Ltd. and FHI 360.

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