

Capacity strengthening of local civil society organizations offering HIV services: Learning experiences from Liberia

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BACKGROUND

With support from the U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the FHI 360-led Linkages across the Continuum of HIV Services for Key Populations Affected by HIV (LINKAGES) project and the subsequent Meeting Targets and Maintaining Epidemic Control (EpiC) project implemented a comprehensive package of HIV prevention, care, and treatment services among 10 civil society organizations (CSOs) serving key populations (KPs) in Montserrado County, Liberia.

At the start of LINKAGES, the technical and management capacity of these CSOs was limited. LINKAGES, in collaboration with Pact, Inc., conducted an organizational capacity assessment to identify gaps. They then used evidence-based strategies to address the gaps through mentoring and coaching on how to scale up and sustain more effective service delivery for people living with HIV (PLHIV) in Liberia, both in the general population and among KPs. By building the technical and leadership capacity of KP-led local organizations, LINKAGES/EpiC sought to increase the country's progress toward the UNAIDS 95-95-95 goals and achievement of epidemic control.

DESCRIPTION

BASELINE ASSESSMENT

The process started with the collection of baseline information on technical and organizational thematic areas in order to identify where capacity building was needed. The assessments were done with all 10 CSO partners using two standardized toolkits: the Integrated Technical and Organizational Capacity Assessment (ITOCA) and the Organization Performance Index (OPI). Using the ITOCA results, the project developed institutional strengthening plans to address the issues or gaps identified, provide mentoring and coaching support, and monitor and track progress. After six months of implementation, the OPI was then used to measure changes in performance over time.

TECHNICAL CAPACITY BUILDING

The technical support for KP-led HIV prevention, care, and treatment services focused on increasing their capacity and skill through microplanning. Microplanning is a process of self-empowerment and decentralized outreach management in which

KP individuals are empowered to understand their HIV needs, such as their networks, risk profiles, hot spot characteristics, age, and frequency of unprotected sexual encounters. KPs are trained and mentored to understand these dynamics using their own data, which they analyze at the hot-spot level. This process helps them make substantive contributions to the provision of high-quality services tailored to their needs.

ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY BUILDING

Organizational capacity building with the 10 CSO partners was intended to strengthen the organizations' operational and management systems and encourage sustainability. The specific areas of focus were internal control systems, operational management, and governance, such as operational policies, resource mobilization, sustainability, partnership, and networking. The support was intended to enhance the CSOs' skills in effective and efficient HIV service delivery, leadership, and managerial capacity, as well as to strengthen their financial systems and ability to comply with donor rules and regulations.



CSO partners conduct the Integrated Technical Organization Capacity Assessment (ITOCA).



CSO partners are trained on microplanning.



CSO partners participate in organization system management and institutional strengthening training.

RESULTS

From April 2019 through September 2021, EpiC Liberia trained the 10 CSOs in HIV community interventions to empower peer outreach workers, PLHIV, and KPs, including establishing 23 PLHIV support groups to understand and manage their needs, risks, and rights regarding HIV services.

The first OPI assessment measuring performance and impact found that only two out of four performance measurements — “efficiency” and “effectiveness” — had achieved the maximum score of 4.0. “Relevance in meeting the needs of beneficiaries” scored 2.5, and “sustainability” scored 1.0. To improve the scores for relevance and sustainability, the project provided consistent coaching and mentorship in “business development,” which involved creating other sustainability measures (e.g., responding to requests for proposals and writing expressions of interest, developing a donor database, establishing and maintaining a professional network for development opportunities) and mentoring on how

to diversify funding (Table 1). These efforts led to two supported CSOs winning new grants for HIV service delivery from the Global Fund, while two other CSOs developed successful small business enterprises. In addition, from 2019 to 2021, the coaching and mentoring contributed to the project reaching 15,000 individuals with a comprehensive HIV service package, testing 12,000 individuals for HIV, and identifying 850 individuals as living with HIV, 94 percent of whom were linked to treatment.



A PLHIV support group participates in microfinance training by Women Owning Resources Together (WORTH).

CONCLUSIONS

Support to build the capacity of CSOs in technical and management operations facilitated the development of a strong KP HIV program, networks of KP and PLHIV CSO partners for technical support, and positive working relationships with health facilities. In addition, community-based HIV service delivery, reporting on ART services and activities, the tracking of achievements, and reporting of progress in information sharing and decision-making also improved. Furthermore, the CSOs were able to maintain positive relations with the national government through the National AIDS Control Program and National AIDS Commission through sustained conversation around the epidemic and progress toward the UNAIDS 95-95-95 goals.

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TABLE 1. OPI scores

Organization	Results	Standards	Delivery	Reach	Target Population	Learning	Resources	Social Capital	Overall Score	Effectiveness	Efficiency	Relevance	Sustainability	Year	OPI Completed Date	Type of Partner
Lutheran Church Liberia (LCL)	4	4	4	4	4	1	4	4	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	2021	2021-01-19	Faith-based organization
EQUIP Liberia	2	3	3	2	2	2	1	3	3.63	4.00	4.00	2.50	4.00	2021	2021-01-15	Nongovernmental organization
Stop AIDS in Liberia	1	2	2	2	3	2	1	4	2.25	2.50	2.50	2.00	2.00	2021	2021-01-21	Nongovernmental organization
Lesbian Gay Association of Liberia (LEGAL)	1	2	1	2	4	1	3	3	2.13	1.50	2.00	2.50	2.50	2021	2021-01-25	Nongovernmental organization
White Rose Alliance (WRA)	1	1	1	2	2	1	1	2	2.13	1.50	1.50	2.50	3.00	2021	2021-01-27	Nongovernmental organization
Liberia Women Empowerment Network (LIWEN)	2	2	1	2	2	1	1	2	1.38	1.00	1.50	1.50	1.50	2021	2021-01-29	Nongovernmental organization
Youth Alive Liberia (YAL)	1	2	2	2	2	1	2	2	1.63	2.00	1.50	1.50	1.50	2021	2021-01-28	Nongovernmental organization
The Network of Youth Living Positive in Liberia (TNOL+)	1	1	2	2	3	2	2	2	1.75	1.50	2.00	1.50	2.00	2021	2021-01-29	Nongovernmental organization
LibNeP+	1	4	1	3	1	1	1	4	1.88	1.00	2.00	2.50	2.00	2021	2021-12-02	Nongovernmental organization
YOUNETPO	4	3	3	3	1	3	1	4	(no data)	(no data)	(no data)	(no data)	(no data)	2021	2021-12-03	Nongovernmental organization