

## HIV/AIDS INFORMATION NEEDS OF GRADE 12 LEARNERS IN MASERU

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### ABSTRACT

*In this article a needs-based perspective is suggested for approaching communication about HIV/Aids. The argumentation is guided by two assumptions. The first is that HIV/Aids communication campaigns that do not take into account the information needs of target audiences are not likely to produce the desired impact. The second is that such campaigns are bound to fail if they are not informed by research which will help determine the needs, preferred mode of production, packaging as well as dissemination channels. Such research will also help evaluate the impact of campaigns on target audiences. These assumptions were validated in research focusing on determining the HIV/Aids information needs of Grade 12 learners living in Maseru, Lesotho. The main conclusion drawn from the results is that HIV/Aids campaigns that have been undertaken in Lesotho have tended to focus very little on the information needs of this target group.*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Lesotho is a mountainous country with an estimated 2.1 million people and is completely landlocked by South Africa. The 2002-2003 global UNAIDS (see the list of acronyms at the end of article) report cites Lesotho as one of the countries in Sub-Sahara Africa that has been hardest hit by the Aids epidemic - an estimated 31% of the population between the ages of 15-49 are living with HIV (UNAIDS 2002). The 2002-2003 global UNAIDS report also acknowledges that young people's vulnerability to HIV is compounded by limited knowledge of how the virus is spread and how it can be avoided (UNAIDS 2002: 71).

This article is guided by a study examining the HIV/Aids information needs of Grade 12 learners living in Maseru, Lesotho. Two assumptions come into play. The first assumption is that HIV/Aids communication campaigns that do not take into account the information needs of target audiences are not likely to produce the desired impact. The second is that such campaigns are bound for failure if they are not informed by research which will help determine the needs related to the preferred mode of production, packaging as well as dissemination channels.

The needs-oriented approach suggests that the information needs of audiences play an important role in determining the effectiveness of communication campaigns. The study thus considered the idea of human needs and individual outcomes in an attempt to legitimise these assumptions. This was further supplemented through reference to other studies, reports and publications.

## **KEY ISSUES IN THE STUDY**

As mentioned in the introduction, the assumption guiding the study was that HIV/Aids messages (text and pictorial) that are currently in circulation in Lesotho are not taking into account the HIV/Aids information needs of the youth. The study attempted to address the following key issues:

- To determine the type of HIV/Aids information that youth want to see, hear and read.
- To determine the level of HIV/Aids knowledge among the youth.
- To determine HIV/Aids information-seeking behaviour of youth.
- To determine the type of media that best serves the youth's HIV/Aids information needs.

- To determine the effectiveness of the different media used in transmitting HIV/Aids information to youth.

The study therefore focussed mainly on determining the HIV/Aids information needs of grade 12 learners (as representative of the youth) living in Maseru and their preferred mode of communication. It concentrated on five schools in Maseru, and did not attempt to generalise the findings to the entire youth population in Lesotho.

According to Motlomelo and Sebatane (1999:6) young people in Lesotho frequently engage in sexual activities and have multiple sexual partners, which may result in high incidence of pregnancies and risk of infection with sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/Aids.

The study also sought to advise sectors involved in the production, packaging and dissemination of HIV/Aids messages for youth on what factors to be wary of when designing mass communication campaigns for the youth.

The messages examined comprised those displayed on posters produced by Positive Action which have also been turned into billboards and are visible in the town of Maseru – from the border post to the bus-stop area, government offices, health centres and other places which are frequented by the public. The posters and billboards are both textual and pictorial in nature and are aimed at all sectors of the community.

A significant aspect of current HIV/Aids messages that are in circulation in Lesotho and are targeted at young people is that they assume youth to be a homogenous group. They are not desegregated by sex, age or socio-economic circumstances. This is attributed to the fact that there is very little evidence of studies focusing on youth and sexuality that inform on the type of information to be transmitted as well as the preferred mode of dissemination.

Lesotho's National Aids Strategic Plan 2002/2003 – 2004/2005, a three-year rolling plan for the national response to the HIV/Aids epidemic in Lesotho, does not have a chapter suggesting the specific communication strategies that could guide different sectors that address HIV/Aids issues.

In fact, Lesotho does not have a mass media communication strategy on HIV/Aids specifically aimed at the Basotho youth, nor does it have a national HIV/Aids communication strategy targeted at all sectors of

the community. This is so despite the fact that information and communication are recognised as effective tools in addressing HIV/Aids issues.

A mass communication strategy can go a long way towards reducing high HIV infections among youth as well as promoting a culture of caring for infected persons and creating a responsible youth population.

As noted above, the potential of the mass media to reach a wide and variant audience is widely recognised. It is acknowledged that youth rely on the mass media for their diverse information needs. This is because, in most settings, issues such as HIV/Aids are not discussed in a manner that would reduce the stigma associated with the epidemic, as it is often perceived as a sexual and killer disease.

A mass media communication strategy that addresses the HIV/Aids information needs of youth can remedy the situation. Such a framework has to be preceded by research that looks into the HIV/Aids information needs of youth living in Lesotho as well the preferred mode for transmitting these messages. Research is recognised as an important component of such an exercise but is often overlooked by many sectors involved in the design of HIV/Aids mass media campaigns targeted at youth. Coulson (n.d. 7) observes that the (American) John Hopkins model for public health underscores that formative and evaluative research are essential and recommends that 10% of a campaign budget should be spent on research and evaluation .

It is therefore evident that formative and evaluative research that would inform mass communication campaigns are hardly undertaken by different sectors engaged in producing HIV/Aids messages for specific target audiences in Lesotho. These sectors have spent a lot of time and money developing educational resources, some of which have failed to carry across the intended message because of the media used. The Lesotho Distance Teaching Centre survey report on the potential of the media recognises that the problem is not with the media as such, but has more to do with how to communicate in a way that the target audiences could easily comprehend what they are being taught (LDTC 1987:2).

### **CONSIDERING HUMAN NEEDS**

A World Health Organisation report of a regional workshop on AIDS/STDs acknowledges that prevention of HIV/Aids among youth should be a priority as youth have been identified as the hardest hit

segment of the population. They start experimenting with sex at an early stage (10-12) and they are increasingly being exposed to HIV infection.

The report further identifies youth needs as access to relevant scientific information, education and communication on HIV/Aids in order to guide decision-making and to change behaviour.

The needs theory underscores that individuals seek information in order to meet certain needs. Information seeking is viewed as a response to cognitive needs whereby information is needed to address issues such as prevention and treatment. The theory also views information seeking as a response to affective needs, which address emotional and psychologically related needs. The cognitive and affective needs are observed to be strongest in individuals seeking health related information - the content of which may not always be medically related. It is acknowledged therefore that what is most needed is information on how to deal with a problem, although the information itself may have dire effects on the individual seeking it (Coulson n.d.: 4).

Hanneman (1975:38) observes that once subjected to stimuli (messages), audiences selectively process incoming information by attending only to those issues which they have need or value for. That is, they interpret what they perceive within their frame of reference in accordance with their needs or attitudes at that moment.

## **MEDIA AND INDIVIDUAL OUTCOMES**

Youth seeking information on HIV/Aids are presented with a number of media options from which to choose those messages that satisfy their needs. Some will opt for the radio, theatre or television.

With regard to posters used for transmitting HIV/Aids information (as is the case in this study), the uses and gratification theory has been explored to explain individual outcomes of the selected media. The theory focuses on the media audiences and not on the message as its starting-point and explores communication behaviour in terms of direct experiences with the media. It views members of the audience as actively utilising media contents rather than their being passively acted upon (Littlejohn 2000: 349).

When audiences already possess large quantities of information about a subject, evidence offered through any medium does not add much to their store of information and will probably not change their views

significantly. Also audience perception of the information presented will impact on the outcome of messages. It is therefore evident that audiences are largely responsible for choosing the medium to meet their needs.

McLuhan (1964: 22), considers media as one of the important means of meeting people's needs. McLuhan (*ibid.*) further distinguishes between hot and cool media whereby both types of media have different effects on audiences. According to his theory, a hot medium (e.g. radio, posters, lecture or film) allows for less participation than a cool medium such as a telephone. In considering the best medium for transmission of HIV/Aids information that serves the needs of youth, the study has attempted to look at the posters produced by Positive Action in terms of their hotness and coolness.

### **STUDIES ON YOUTH, SEX, SEXUALITY AND COMMUNICATION**

Young people are recognised as vulnerable to HIV because of amongst other things their lack of access to HIV information (UNAIDS 2001: 15). According to UNAIDS (2001:17), ignorance about the epidemic remains pervasive among young people, many of whom do not know how to protect themselves from HIV.

The Christian Health Association of Lesotho sentinel surveillance report of four districts in Lesotho (including Maseru) highlights the need to target HIV/Aids information across the entire age spectrum, with age 10-14 needing more information (CHAL 2001:1). The report also suggests that information and education that is provided by the school is not only sufficient but also adequate as the vulnerable age group has confidence in their teachers. The report further suggests that the family unit needs to be strengthened with adequate information on HIV/Aids in order for this information to have an impact.

According to the CHAL report (2001: 13), education campaigns have been intensively launched in Lesotho to combat HIV/Aids with little demonstrated effects. The report also points out that Aids publications reiterate that knowledge alone is not sufficient to change people's behaviour but that many traditional practices also have to be overcome.

The Ministry of Health HSR research report (MOHSW 1999: 35) underscores that there is a need to use more HIV/AIDS IEC strategies,

and its effects and impacts should be regularly assessed (for example an evaluation every two years should be undertaken). The report further suggests that people should be exposed to as many channels as possible in order for them to choose channels of their own preference (MOHSW 1999: 35).

A WHO report of a consultative regional workshop on AIDS/STD identifies youth's needs as access to scientifically sound information, education and communication on HIV/Aids in order to guide decision making and behavioural change (UN 2001: 13).

A Lesotho Distance Teaching Centre survey report on the potential of media in Lesotho acknowledges that mass media such as radio and press are the most efficient media to transmit information quickly to a larger number of people in the shortest possible time (LDTC 1987: 72). The report further highlights that India has been using filmstrips, puppets and radio mostly to reach illiterate village people. It also notes that Tanzania refused to introduce television as they felt that television costs were too much for their capabilities and decided to work with radio and any form of print that could carry messages to a rural Tanzanian. The report notes that the Health Education Unit of the Ministry of Health in Lesotho has been involved in educating Basotho to find out if people have heard about certain issues. Lectures, demonstrations, group discussions, and group and individual practice in workshops and individualised instruction methods of teaching are often used by nurses in Lesotho to get the message across (LDTC *ibid.*).

According to a report on action research by Tomaselli (1997: 1), messages on HIV/Aids are often constructed without reference to those to whom the messages are supposed to reach. The report further reveals that theatre, action research, print and related forms of subject-generated expression are more effective in changing social attitudes among specific groups than glossy, expensive and audio remote messages (Tomaselli 1997: 10). A Ministry of Health Research Report on factors contributing to limited effects of IEC strategies on Aids in changing people's sexual behaviour, underscores that a significantly low number of people have changed their sexual behaviour despite the fact that IEC programmes have been going on for a number of years (MOHSW 1993: 1).

Ranneileng and Bwatwa (1995) recommend that in delivering health services on HIV/Aids, the target groups and group characteristics

should clearly be defined as well as appropriate messages that go with it. It is also acknowledged that the mass media have greatly exposed youth to a variety of lifestyle messages and also opened up opportunities for them to learn about new illnesses and preventive behaviour.

According to the 1994 Lesotho survey on radio listenership, newspaper readership and television viewership, radio is far more popular in Lesotho compared to television (Sechaba Consultants 1994: 62). The survey also revealed that extensive readership of newspapers/magazines was mainly limited to those who used Sesotho as a medium as opposed to English.

## **METHODOLOGY**

One way of finding out about a group of people is to collect information from everyone in a group. However this may not be possible due to costs and impracticality. The alternative then is to collect information from only some people in the group so that their responses and characteristics reflect the group from which they are drawn.

Research data were collected by a multi-method approach, which involves getting data on something with more than one method.

Three focus groups comprising a total of 30 grade 12 learners from three different high schools in Maseru were used to determine whether current messages on HIV/Aids that are produced by Positive Action, as well as the media and language used, serve the HIV/Aids information needs of youth. The focus groups were also used to assess the impact of the messages and to determine how they are interpreted by the youth.

A questionnaire to determine knowledge of HIV/Aids issues, HIV/Aids information needs and the preferred medium for transmission was developed and administered as a non-probability sample. The questionnaire would supplement the focus group results.

In-depth interviews were also conducted with 4 information officers involved in the production of HIV/Aids messages in order to determine whether the youth are involved in their production and whether research is undertaken before messages are produced and disseminated.

Thus in selecting the sample for the above exercise a mix of purposive, quota and available sampling methods were used. This



would help eradicate some form of bias that might otherwise be possible if one were to opt for only one type of non-probability method. This was also motivated by the fact that due to constraints of money and manpower, the research was mainly interested in obtaining an idea of the range of responses or ideas that youth have on messages on HIV/Aids, as well as the best media and language for transmitting them.

## **FINDINGS**

Overall it would appear that the underlying assumption of the study that sectors engaged in the design of communication strategies do not take into account the needs of target audiences is in fact justified. It is important to mention that the findings of the study are by no means universal.

Findings show that the HIV/Aids information and communication needs of target audiences are usually predetermined by sectors engaged in the design of communication campaigns.

A downward approach to communication where the focus is more on influencing target audiences to adopt a particular behaviour predominated. Generally the approach adopted followed the Hypodermic Needle theory stance where no room is given for feedback. IEC staff usually followed the pattern of identifying behaviours which they believe would help solve the problems; for example, "use a condom" and "avoid sex before marriage".

Evaluative surveys to measure the communication campaigns are hardly undertaken as it is usually assumed that target audiences have responded to the message. Campaigns usually fail when target audiences do not identify with the message or communication channel used.

The type of HIV/Aids messages that participants prefer as well as the preferred channels for disseminating this information may be posited. Messages that say "Aids kills" and "avoid sex" have to a large extent become superfluous. The same can also be said of communication channels used. Participants have indicated that they want more practical information such as how to live positively with HIV/Aids. They have in the same breath also indicated their preference for interpersonal communication channels to allow for in-depth discussion on HIV/Aids. They have singled out these interpersonal

channels as people living with HIV/Aids as well as experts on HIV/Aids issues.

Participants mentioned that they would like to be involved in the design of HIV/Aids communication messages and have also indicated the type of information that would go into these messages such as “a friend with Aids is still a friend”.

An approach that takes the above into consideration would have to emanate from a person-centred perspective. A needs-oriented approach is required.

Operationalising HIV/Aids communication from a needs-oriented approach would entail that communication campaigns to prevent the spread of the virus and to halt its impact should be developed and implemented at personal levels – that is at the individual, the family and the community levels. The community includes churches and schools. This means that communication campaigns should be placed in contexts where communication is on-going (i.e. where there are social interactions) as a way of enabling the involvement of all people. Hence channels of communication would be interpersonal. Other forms of media like radio would be used as information sources while interpersonal communication would entail interaction, discussions and debates.

Thus the major argument underlying the proposed approach is that, as target audiences design and take charge of HIV/Aids communication campaigns, they will be able to generate more information about the pandemic in their communities, such as factors that increase or decrease the rate of infections in communities. They will also gain information from specialists in the field, on what government policies are saying on the issue, and on how other communities working together are addressing the pandemic.

The proposed approach however does not suggest that the top-down approach should be discarded completely. The top-down approach should be used to set the HIV/Aids agenda based on new and emerging thinking and research in this field. The agenda can be set using the mass media, while the proposed approach will emphasise dialogue on the issues within communities and between all stakeholders involved.

### **Content**

It is quite clear that the content of HIV/Aids information has to take into account the information needs of target audiences. Sectors

engaged in designing HIV/Aids communication strategies need to have the skills and training that will allow them to engage in dialogue with target audiences.

Communication experts need to be able to create opportunities for conversations between themselves and target audiences before deciding on the content of HIV/Aids messages. For example, as mentioned in the findings, participants want information that will enable them to live positively with HIV/Aids. Living positively with HIV/Aids is subjective. For some it entails having access to anti-retrovirals and for some it is the type of diet that one eats.

It is clear that the primary role of the communication expert is to recognise these needs and analyse them together with target audiences before deciding on the content of messages. This will ensure that the diverse information needs of target audiences are met. Thus for sectors involved in this exercise, the recommendation is not only to work with secondary data but to utilise to an even greater extent primary data obtained from target audiences.

### **Media**

Participants largely preferred radio and television as sources of information. However, national television coverage is very low and is only restricted to urban Maseru. Young people in Lesotho tend to rely more on South African TV.

Television will not meet the HIV/Aids information needs of youth in Lesotho because TV Lesotho only broadcasts for two hours a day. Broadcast times are also around the same times that South African TV broadcasts news, situational comedies and popular programmes like "Generations". Thus although Lesotho TV may come up with good HIV/Aids programmes, there would be conflict in families about which channels to switch to.

Radio is very popular in Lesotho. The national radio station Radio Lesotho has a very wide coverage area. Commercial radio stations only cover urban parts of Maseru and are very popular among the youth there. These radio stations are also great sources of information on HIV/Aids for the youth. Findings show that radio has been cited as one of the key sources of information. Radio also allows for interpersonal communication with talk shows and phone-ins. However, these programmes would have to be revised to cater for youth-oriented information on HIV/Aids.

Local newspapers are not very popular among the youth. Currently there are no youth magazines in Lesotho. Although posters and pamphlets are used to disseminate HIV/Aids information they were not cited as the most favoured sources of information - only as other sources of information. These media can be used to supplement available information on HIV/Aids.

Interpersonal communication and drama were cited as the most preferred media. The preferred type of interpersonal communication is one that is evidence-based whereby experts in the field of HIV/Aids can discuss issues with target audiences. Drama is seen to be more realistic and as having the ability to hold attention and transmit information in an interesting manner.

### **Language**

It is clear from the findings that language is not an issue to be overlooked. Choice of language (that is text or pictorial) can include or exclude people from a communication encounter. It is clear that whatever language is used to disseminate HIV/Aids information, it should cater for all social groups; that is, the educated and the illiterate. Most of the participants showed a preference for the use of both English and Sesotho in HIV/Aids messages. Participants also noted that images relevant to messages should be used to complement it while, at the same time, the images should also serve to meet the information needs of people who cannot read and write.

The issue of language poses a further challenge to those engaged in designing HIV/Aids communication strategies. The recommendation that HIV/Aids information needs of target groups should be taken into consideration when designing such strategies still stands. As has been mentioned, efforts should be made by those sectors engaged in such exercises to ensure that an information gap between those who have access to information in whatever format and those who do not have, is not widened further. They should seek to close the gap. Communication media such as dramas and youth forums could be utilised to disseminate HIV/Aids information to those that cannot read and write in a language that they understand.

## CONCLUSION

Since the HIV/Aids pandemic requires urgent responses, communication from a needs-oriented perspective is imperative. All in all, the youth are no longer interested in messages that are linked to death, but want to know how to live positively with HIV/Aids; care for affected and infected persons; and they also want to play a part in finding solutions to HIV/Aids problems.

## ACRONYMS USED

AIDS	Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome
CHAL	Christian Health Association of Lesotho
FGDs	Focus Group Discussions
HIV	Human Immune Deficiency Virus
IEC	Information, Education and Communication
LAPCA	Lesotho AIDS Programmes Coordination Authority
LTDC	Lesotho Distance Teaching Centre
MOHSW HSR	Ministry of Health and Social Welfare - Health System Research
STIs	Sexually Transmitted Infections
STDs	Sexually Transmitted Diseases
UN	United Nations
UNAIDS	Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/Aids
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
WHO	World Health Organisation

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