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Catalysing workplace responses to HIV/AIDS

Using a risk analysis tool in Ethiopia

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Using a simple risk analysis tool offers a practical and powerful way to catalyse CSO response to HIV/AIDS. IIRR (International Institute of Rural Reconstruction) has been using a risk management tool with 20 NGOs in Ethiopia. They have seen encouraging responses.

As one participant concluded: “Before we despised each other. Now we learned a lot by using IIRR’s HIV/AIDS risk analysis tool.” Another gained the courage during one workshop to disclose her HIV positive status to fellow staff. Rather than stigmas, this has led to both practical and emotional support from her organisation. As a result, she has been able to continue working both happily and productively.

We believe that other capacity building providers might learn from this approach. This paper describes what it looks like in practice.

HIV in Ethiopia

Ethiopia, like many other countries in Africa, is suffering from the impact of HIV/AIDS. Although the prevalence rate is only 2%, there are almost a million adults and a million children living with HIV (UNAIDS Epidemiological fact sheet on HIV and AIDS 2008).

Within development organisations, most efforts treat HIV as simply a health issue. They focus on the impact of the pandemic on programme delivery, but not on the workplace. However AIDS-related illnesses and deaths amongst staff and their families are reducing productivity and increasing labour costs.

In response to this, four Dutch co-funding agencies (NOVIB, CORDAID, ICCO and Plan Netherlands) started a pilot project in 2004 with 14 partner organisations in Ethiopia to mainstream HIV/AIDS in the workplace. IIRR Ethiopia was selected to coordinate the work. Since 2007, IIRR has been working intensely with ICCO/Kerk in Actie to support 20 NGOs in Ethiopia on their workplace response to

HIV/AIDS. A key component of this process has been an HIV/AIDS risk analysis tool.

What is risk analysis?

Risk analysis is a way of assessing how likely an organisation is to be adversely affected by HIV/AIDS.

IIRR uses a formula, adapted from its Community Managed Risk Reduction tool that posits that:

$$\text{Risk} = \frac{\text{Hazard} \times \text{Vulnerability}}{\text{Capacity}}$$

The greater the hazard of HIV in the environment and the greater the vulnerability of the organisation, the higher the risk. The higher the organisation’s capacity to respond, the lower the risk.

Risk assessment is an essential element of developing an HIV/AIDS workplace policy. It

provides the motivation, incentive and energy to respond. If management and staff are convinced by the high risk of HIV to their organisation they will own their response.

Risk assessment also helps organisations plan their response. It can identify appropriate actions to manage HIV/AIDS in the workplace that are consistent with their capacity and context.

The HIV/AIDS risk assessment provides NGOs with a good start and insight into basic issues that internal mainstreaming should address. It enables them appraise their HIV/AIDS basic knowledge and their vulnerability to HIV/AIDS. It helps them to identify present strengths and weaknesses in their internal response to HIV/AIDS and the subsequent action that is needed.

What is the process?

The risk assessment process is done through in-house workshops, which involve a diversity of staff from different levels in the organisation. The risk assessment helps to identify concerns and enable participants to explore experience and discover answers for themselves. Before conducting risk assessment, partners received background information on an HIV/AIDS risk analysis, with its components.

There are four main stages in the IIRR risk analysis process:

1. Understanding HIV/AIDS as a **hazard**
2. Assess **vulnerability**
3. Identifying the **capacity** to deal with HIV/AIDS
4. **taking action** to mitigate risk

1. HIV/AIDS as a hazard

At workshops, participants first explore the hazard of HIV to their organisation. They analyse the characteristics of HIV/AIDS; how it affects their organisation and themselves. Characterising of HIV/AIDS allows people to give their own definitions. For instance,

participants defined HIV/AIDS as a killer disease, asymptomatic, transmissible, and linked with sexuality and not curable diseases.

As a hazard, HIV/AIDS affects both human (staff) and non-human (organisation) components of the environment where people depend on leading a quality life. These are called elements at risk. When assessing HIV/AIDS risk at organizational level, the level of risk may vary among different staff members depending on their age, sex, nature of work, levels of awareness on mode of transmission and prevention methods, etc. Potential risks of HIV/AIDS at the individual level could be loss of income due to lost working hours, and at the organisational level cost incurred in replacing staff lost to HIV/AIDS.

2. Vulnerability assessment

Vulnerability assessment is the second step of IIRR's HIV/AIDS risk analysis. This exercise aims to enable the participants to estimate the vulnerability of staff and the organisation to HIV/AIDS.

The extent to which men and women can openly express vulnerability and discuss sexual attitudes and practices varies. Male participants in the workshops tended to be more willing to share their experiences and show their vulnerability to risky sex than women. Women feared that others in their group would spread their stories among staff members. It may also be because there are different social norms about male and female sexual behaviour.

In many vulnerability assessments we found that staff members who travel frequently, females, young and single workers and staff with low income are more vulnerable to HIV. This could be due to unsafe sex, lack of discussion forums to break the silence, low economic status of women, lack of power to decide on their life matters, lack of access to information on reproductive health, cultural/spiritual norms and values.

3. Assessing capacity

The third step of HIV/AIDS risk assessment is a capacity assessment that allows partners to identify their strengths and weaknesses in coping with HIV/AIDS in the workplace. Capacity encompasses knowledge and skills related to particular hazards, resources and systems within the organisation to provide support to individuals at risk. The capacity assessment identifies the strengths and resources present in staff and the organisation to prevent HIV/AIDS and cope with its impact for those infected and affected at the workplace.

Identifying local knowledge and existing resources are essential to address the effects of HIV/AIDS in the workplace in sustainable way. For instance, in Ethiopia people have strong social network to visit each other. Particularly when people are ill, neighbours provide them with food, make patient's beds and give psychosocial support to the patients. Currently, NGOs are benefiting from the existing social network by providing training to the community so that they can care for bed-ridden patients.

The capacity assessment exercises focus on how organisational policies, decisions, system, procedures, staff attitudes or beliefs, norms and learning team work and partnership contribute to effectively and efficiently addressing HIV/AIDS at workplace.

VCT risk

One support staff, who works in faith-based organisation VCT (Volunteer Counseling Testing) project site related that she has never had training on how to carefully dispose of used needles. A risk assessment exercise would have highlighted her vulnerability to HIV/AIDS and encouraged appropriate action.

Ethiopian partners tended to assess their capacity as low in terms of knowledge about

HIV/AIDS; willingness and cooperation to support workers living with HIV/AIDS; conducting open discussions; and bringing about attitudinal change.

4. Taking action

This capacity assessment, when analysed together with hazard and vulnerability, led to discussion of what they could do to mitigate the resulting risk. They considered questions such as:

- Do staff need better understanding of HIV/AIDS in the workplace?
- What support/training might they need to adjust?
- Who can the organisation learn from to avoid mistakes and make best use of existing resources?
- Who will take responsibility for the new work?
- How will it fit in to existing systems?
- Is there a need to change organisational policies?

Partners highlighted their need to support:

- continuous education
- dialogue forums and group discussions
- making available promotional IEC materials
- develop HIV/AIDS workplace policy
- establish sustainable financial resource (HIV/AIDS fund)
- assign focal persons and task force
- set up safety measures for field staff and highly vulnerable workers
- promote knowledge of one's status through VCT
- arrange exposure visit to learn about internal mainstreaming.

What were the outcomes?

In general, introducing the HIV/AIDS risk analysis tool and conducting the risk assessment has brought large changes among NGOs, including:

Increased disclosure – Initially there was no culture of openness among partners but now they have tried to break the silence. Some staff members of ERCEPA and Kale Heywet have disclosed their status willingly and shared their personal testimony of how they are living positively with HIV after conducting HIV/AIDS risk assessments. Even some pastors have disclosed their status to teach others in their preaching.

Improved communication – the workshops enabled participants to talk openly about sexual issues for the first time with their staff members. Women appear to have benefited most from increased assertiveness skills, saying that they have more confidence to stand by their decisions and to deal with difficult situations. In general participants felt that working together in vulnerability assessment exercise, sharing their thoughts and feelings, had helped to strengthen their relationship with their staff members.

Conducive working environments – flexible working hours; access to antiretroviral treatment; less discrimination and greater emotional support from colleagues.

Networking – A network of NGOs working on HIV workplace issues has developed from amongst the participating NGOs. Sharing experiences and learning from others is an important element in the process. Partner organisations share their self assessment report and learn from each other. They now conduct monthly discussions on various HIV/AIDS issues. One partner, Kale Heywet Church has offered free counselling and testing service for all HIV/AIDS project partners.

What have we learnt?

From the process we have learnt:
There are pros and cons of having mixed groups. In terms of gender, men visibly changed their attitude when they listened to women talking about their experiences and

feelings related to gender and sexuality. But women were less able to speak up in mixed groups because of the way they have been socialised.

It is important for both staff and senior management to be involved in assessing risk. This is vital to identify what is needed to respond and develop the motivation to do so. Senior management will need to take responsibility for creating a more conducive workplace environment that is necessary to effect and sustain behaviour change.

There is a danger of discussions degenerating into externalising blame onto others. The vulnerability assessment discussion questions are supposed to be assertive ‘we’ statements that encourage participants to take responsibility. In reality women groups often blamed men for impregnating adolescent girls; while men asserted young women should dress more decently. Also, when presenting on ‘who is at risk’ people can easily become defensive, externalising the problem to others.

In planning, organisations need to carefully consider issues like staff acceptability and involvement, as well as embedding internal mainstreaming activities in their organisational structures to ensure sustainability and conducting HIV/AIDS risk assessment.

Concluding thoughts

Risk assessment is an important tool to stimulate NGO response to HIV/AIDS in the workplace. It can give develop the ownership necessary to move from good intentions into concrete action.

But to date, most capacity building providers in Africa have not used risk assessment enough in assisting NGO clients see the urgency and importance of responding. We need to focus on encouraging NGOs commitment to change by appreciating the risks of not responding. This simple risk analysis tool is one way to do this.