Perceived Benefits, Challenges, and Recommendations for National HIV/AIDS Research Dissemination Efforts in Tanzania

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Abstract

Background Although a number of international and national HIV/AIDS conferences exist, there is not a national conference in Tanzania focusing on disseminating HIV/AIDS research conducted in the country. This creates a missed opportunity for researchers to share their research findings with local policy makers and HIV program implementers who can influence the adoption and implementation of locally promising research to public health and clinical practice settings. This paper reports on the findings from a brainstorming session conducted at the first HIV/AIDS Research Forum designed to enhance local dissemination efforts of HIV/AIDS research conducted in Tanzania. **Method** During the second day of the Forum, which was held in Morogoro, Tanzania, a 1-hour structured brainstorming session was conducted with the Forum participants. Participants included researchers, medical professionals, policymakers, representatives from different ministries. Transcription of the brainstorming session was analyzed to identify benefits of the Forum, perceived challenges for organizing similar HIV/AIDS research dissemination events, and recommendations for addressing the challenges. **Results** Overall, 50 participants attended the Forum and they perceived the forum to be beneficial because it brought together researchers, policymakers, and other stakeholders working in HIV/AIDS programs and implementers. Having policymakers and researchers in the same place enhance the likelihood of policymakers using research findings to inform policies and influence adoption and implementation of effective interventions. Forum participants identified several potential challenges of similar local HIV/AIDS research dissemination efforts including the costs and lack of funding for organizing and hosting such forums or having repetitive presentations. To address these concerns, they recommended a biennial national conference in order to allow more time to raise funds to cover the costs associated with organizing such a conference. **Conclusion** The benefits identified for the Forum highlight the importance of developing a national level HIV/AIDS conference in Tanzania. However, the potential challenges discussed need to be addressed in order to develop a sustainable national HIV/AIDS conference by incorporating the recommendations that forum attendees proposed.

Background

Although significant progress has been made to address the burden of HIV/AIDS, it remains a pressing public health issue in Tanzania [1]. In Tanzania, only 960,000 people are aware of their HIV status, despite the fact that an estimated 1.4 million people are living with HIV [2]. The significant social and economic impacts of the epidemic can be observed in the loss of human capital and the damaging effects on the country's institutional capacity [1]. In response, international and local stakeholders, including the Tanzania Commission for AIDS (TACAIDS), and its partners monitor trends, risk factors, and the prevalence of HIV infection, alongside initiatives to guide strategic planning in the fight against HIV/AIDS [2, 3].

TACAIDS is a government organization established by President Benjamin Mkapa in 2000 to coordinate the efforts of stakeholders in the multi-sectoral response to HIV/AIDS in Tanzania [3]. In 2001, TACAIDS developed the national policy on HIV/AIDS [2, 3]. The National Multisectoral Strategic Framework was

developed to organize and coordinate the contributions of stakeholders to the HIV/AIDS response in Tanzania and to address the damaging and nationwide impact of the HIV/AIDS epidemic [17]. Since its establishment, the organization has taken a strategic leadership role in communicating information about HIV/AIDS. TACAIDS collaborates with several domestic and international partners, including but not limited to, such as the National AIDS Control Programme (NACP) and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) to disseminate comprehensive population and health surveys, and implements programs to combat the damaging social, economic, and health-related effects of HIV/AIDS [2, 3]. For example, TACAIDS, under the leadership of the Prime Minister, in collaboration with the Benjamin Mkapa Foundation, and the National Institute for Medical Research at Muhimbili Medical Research Centre to develop the 2018–2020 Male Catch-Up Plan [4] to guide research [5–9] and programs increase HIV testing services uptake among men in Tanzania.

In an effort to enhance the local dissemination of HIV/AIDS research conducted in Tanzania, TACAIDS organized the first HIV/AIDS Research Forum, which was held on September 2018 in Morogoro, Tanzania. Dissemination is defined as an active approach of spreading evidence-based interventions to the target audience via predetermined channels using planned strategies [10, 11]. Local HIV/AIDS research dissemination is crucial for sharing HIV/AIDS findings with local policymakers, HIV program implementing partners, and other stakeholders who can adopt and implement evidenced-based interventions that have been assessed for local acceptability and feasibility. Although a number of international and national HIV/AIDS conferences exist [12–18], there was no nationally coordinated effort designed to facilitate HIV/AIDS research dissemination in Tanzania before the first HIV/AIDS Research Forum.

The forum convened representatives from various organizations to present findings from clinical trials, socio-behavioral research, and community-level interventions. The objectives of the HIV/AIDS Research Forum were to: 1) disseminate HIV research findings and exchange of knowledge and generate insights and challenges into issues facing HIV research; 2) document key research findings related to policy direction and decision-making and; 3) discuss next steps for intervention implementation and HIV/AIDS research in the country. During the forum, a brainstorming session was conducted to inform the development of future national HIV/AIDS research dissemination forums in Tanzania. This study examined the perceived benefits of the HIV/AIDS research dissemination Forum and potential challenges of developing similar Forums and recommendation for future HIV/AIDS research dissemination Forums and eventual national HIV/AIDS conference in Tanzania.

Methods

Setting and participants

In September 2018, a two-day Forum was organized by TACAIDS in Morogoro, a town in eastern Tanzania. The forum was held at Sokoine University of Agriculture on September 27-28th. During the first day, the executive director of TACAIDS provided welcoming remarks and requested for participants to

introduce themselves and share the name of their respective institutions. A total of 50 attendees were at the forum representing ministries and institutions with diverse background and specialties, including but not limited to, academicians, researchers, policy and decision makers, funding agencies, and implementation partners. After introduction and the official opening of the forum, a number of research presentations were made by different forum participants followed by a discussion session after every 1–2 presentations.

During the second day, the secretariat provided a recap of the presentations from the first day before additional presentations were made and discussed. After the presentations and discussions, a brainstorming session was conducted by co-authors (DFC, AMK) to assess: 1) perceived benefits of the forum; 2) potential challenges of organizing similar Forums and; 3) recommendations on how to overcome these challenges and organize a national HIV/AIDS conference in Tanzania. The executive director of TACAIDS also reminded participants about the TACAIDS's experience in establishing similar efforts in the past that were not sustainable and how TACAIDS was determined to revive this initiative with the inputs of all participants during the brainstorming session.

Data Collection

All 50 Forum attendees were informed of the brainstorming and agreed to participate and discuss the perceived benefits of the Forum and recommendations for how to organize future Forums and a potential national conference focusing on HIV/AIDS. Participants provided verbal consent to be recorded during the brainstorming session which lasted approximately 1 hour. A brief reminder of the purpose of the HIV/AIDS Forum was provided in the beginning of the brainstorming session. The following questions served as guiding points for the brainstorming discussion: 1) Is there an interest in holding similar HIV research meetings? ;2) How should future meetings be organized and how frequent? ;3) Should future meetings be held at the national, zonal, or regional level? 4) What are potential challenges of organizing future meetings? 5) What are the recommendations on how to overcome those challenges when organizing future meetings? At the end, the facilitators asked participants to suggest potential names for the conference. The consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative research (COREQ) checklist was used to ensure the reporting of the study procedures and findings are consistent with the guideline (see Appendix file 1) [19].

Data Analysis

The study was underpinned in a pragmatism methodological orientation and included a descriptive qualitative analysis [20] aimed at understanding perceived benefits of the HIV/AIDS research dissemination Forum as well as challenges of organizing future Forums and recommendations for addressing these challenges. We transcribed the audio-recording of the brainstorming session and reviewed the transcript to compare with the notes taken during the brainstorming to support or clarify some statements in the transcript. After the transcription phase, the experienced qualitative research

team member provided training in qualitative data analysis to research assistants (SS, JV, RR, AO) new to qualitative research. We then developed deductive codes, based on previous qualitative research in Tanzania [7], with primary and secondary code definitions and quotes supporting these codes [21]. SS, JV, RR, and AO coded the transcripts in analytical phases by applying deductive codes but also identifying emerging codes. Coders reviewed the data and applied these structural (deductive) codes. Reliability and validity were established by having at least two research assistants code a subset of the transcript and comparing their respective codes during consensus-coding meetings to resolve any discrepancies [22]. In the second phase, single code reports were generated and reviewed before refining the codes and creating categories related to the deductive codes which included: 1) perceived benefits of hosting HIV/AIDS Research Dissemination Forum; 2) perceived challenges of hosting similar forums; and 3) recommendations for overcoming these challenges. We ensured analytic rigor by meeting regularly to establish agreement regarding code definitions, code application, and categories.

Results

There were 50 stakeholders who attended the two-day HIV/AIDS Research Dissemination Forum in Morogoro from different organizations and institutions, including TACAIDS and several ministries: 1) Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology; 2) Ministry of Finance and Planning, and; 3) Ministry of Energy. Other institutions represented were the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), the National Institute for Medical Research, and Tanzania Center for Diseases Prevention and Control (CDC), National Bureau of Statistic (NBS). Attendees from academic and research institutions were from Sokoine University of Agriculture, Muhimbili University of Health and Allied Sciences (MUHAS), Catholic University Health and Allied Sciences (CUHAS), University of Dar es Salaam (USDM), University of South Carolina (USC), Henry M. Jackson Foundation Medical Research International (HJFMRI). The Morogoro Regional Commissioner and Regional Health Management Team were also in attendance.

A total of 15 presentations were made that varied from the 2016–2017 Tanzania HIV Impact Survey (THIS), to the assessment of the impact of behavior change communication strategies on sexual behaviors among youth, overview of HIV vaccine trials in Tanzania, lessons learned from supporting adolescents living with HIV in Tanzania, and HIV/AIDS coordination mechanism in resource-scarce settings in Tanzania. The brainstorming session occurred after the presentations and the participants' inputs were organized in three categories: 1) perceived benefits of HIV/AIDS Research Dissemination Forum; 2) perceived challenges of organizing future HIV/AIDS Research Dissemination Forum and; 3) recommendations for future HIV/AIDS Research Dissemination Forum and national conference. The different categories and emerging themes are described in the following sections.

Perceived Benefits of HIV/AIDS Research Dissemination Forum

Participants reported several benefits of the forum, including the opportunity for policy makers from different ministries, researchers, programmers, and implementers to convene with the purpose of

combatting HIV/AIDS. The gathering of these different individuals allowed researchers to share their research findings and work in progress, establish new collaborations and for non-researchers, policy makers, and other stakeholders to learn about the different HIV/AIDS-related research taking place in the country.

So, this forum is a very important forum as we have different people [policy makers, non-researchers]. So, the thing that we can do now, just from TACAIDS is to see the key people from this group.

There are other group here I know who have never [attended] those conferences but through this [Forum] they have a chance to present.

Participants emphasized the importance of having policy makers attend the HIV/AIDS research forum because policymakers do not often attend the HIV/AIDS meetings that researchers organize. Participants reported that bringing policymakers with researchers would enhance to possibility that policy makers can use their power to use the research findings to implement policies that can help make the progress necessary to advance HIV prevention, care, and treatment efforts. For example, participants from different ministries, regions, and sectors were able to either learn for the first time or gain a better understanding of the 2016–2017 THIS from a presentation made by a statistician from NBS. The findings from THIS showing that HIV testing was low among men were crucial in motivating the Prime Minister to request TACAIDS to develop the Male Catch-Up Plan and launch a male-targeted HIV testing campaign [4]:

During the THIS that has been presented by Cargano, we are working as a team, all of us, TACAIDS, [NACP], and everybody was there. But when the results came, who gave out the results? TACAIDS! And, during the World Health Day, that's what happened. But, next to that, one of the issues that happened clearly, even in this meeting we have seen, testing services are there. Drugs are there. But why do, especially men, not utilizing our services? You need everybody else... We have just discussed about men who are driving these truck drivers.

Representatives from different ministries and institutions were able to learn how they can become involved in the campaign. Another benefit of the forum that participants reported was the ability for forum attendees to identify challenges of hosting similar HIV/AIDS research forum and provide recommendations on how to organize future meetings and a potential national HIV/AIDS conference:

So, I think the focus that if the question is there an interest in holding similar HIV meeting, yes! Because we have seen here, people have been interested... Potential challenges and solutions we will be sharing on the meetings and discussion we have reached here. Now, once we go back, we will come up with these solutions and share again with this meeting. This is what I am trying to see.

Perceived Challenges of HIV/AIDS Research Dissemination Forum

Aside from the perceived benefits, participants also reported potential challenges of organizing an HIV/AIDS research conference. As aforementioned, the low attendance policy makers at previous

HIV/AIDS research meetings made the participants question whether enough policy makers would attend future HIV/AIDS research meetings. The potential poor attendance of policy makers and decision makers raised another challenge of how researchers would be able to have the support needed to translate the research into policies needed to make implement evidence-based interventions at the national or regional levels. Participants mentioned that the abstract requirement for attending future HIV/AIDS research forums or conference can also deter non-researchers from attending and contribute to the low attendance of policy makers and other stakeholders whose primary work does not involve research.

I don't think that you have ever got something from the ministry over here, because they don't write abstracts. Somebody cannot [may not] be a scientific but can have great ideas .We all see the politicians, we never have a paper from the parliament, but you [they] have great ideas, of which they are relating in this forum.

Related to the presentations, participants shared that if the conference is held too frequently (i.e. annually), then there is the possibility that there will be repetitive presentations from year to year. This concern stemmed from the fact that researchers may not have enough time to complete their projects and advance to new projects within one year since research projects take a long time to be developed, funded, approved by institutional review boards, and carried out. Other potential challenges were related to the costs associated with organizing a national or regional HIV/AIDS conference, the lack of coordination between organizations involved in HIV/AIDS programs, and the potential time conflict between the national conference and international HIV/AIDS conferences.

Recommendations For HIV/AIDS Research Dissemination Forum

Participants offered several suggestions for overcoming potential challenges described above and make key recommendations that can inform the development of a future HIV/AIDS Research Dissemination Forum or national conference. First, participants agreed that there is a need to have these forums and some participants suggested such forums happen every two years to give researchers more time so that they can come with new findings and minimize the costs of having the forum annually:

I think we need them every, after every two years because we need researches that will be really informative and that can be translated into policies. So, in coordinating these researches, I am suggesting whoever is interested in researching on HIV/AIDS in this country, after getting a clearance, or before getting clearance from the National Institute for Medical Research...should get some input on the topic or on the title from TACAIDS, so that in the process of whatever you are doing, or you are researching on, TACAIDS should be expecting something out of it. So that at the end, this research can have the flavor or it it tastes of a policy that is needed in order to, to inform whatever interventions we are designing in the fight against HIV/AIDS. That is what I would like to put forward.

Second, participants suggested that TACAIDS develop strategies in collaboration with other organizations to solicit funds to cover the costs associated with organizing such forums. Third, to increase the coordination among organizations involved in HIV/AIDS programs in the country, participants recommended that any issues between TACAIDS and other organizations are resolved in order to attract multi-sectoral stakeholders and increase teamwork and inter-organizational communication. Fourth, participants preferred a national-level forum over a regional-level one. An increase in inter-organizational communication can allow organizations to combine forums and come together instead of having several smaller forums. Participants also recommended greater cross-collaborations between researchers, policy makers, and program implementers prior to the conference in order to enhance the success of the conference. Regarding this recommendation, participants also stated that future forums and conferences should allot the first day for scientific presentations and the second day for policy dialogue and action plans. Participants also stated that presentations from personnel who do not submit scientific papers but can share relevant ideas. Furthermore, discussion-based forums, where presentations are delivered in simple language instead of in complex scientific terms and statistics, are preferred in order for members outside of the scientific community to understand. The following quotation illustrates another one of the key recommendations:

I am now seeing the contradiction because we have NACP and we have TACAIDS, when do you go to NACP they say they have the data, TACAIDS you have the implementations... When you have to discuss with your fellows at NACP who are doing the same activities, so that you share the same activities in the same event, you see... I'm proposing you put up a task force so that you resolve everything that may [be] part of the contradictions. That way when we start moving we move as a team, instead of moving as TACAIDS alone. Because in a way you go there to organize the events now that you need to organize.

Discussion

To our knowledge, this is the first study from a brainstorming session organized to explore the perceived benefits of an HIV/AIDS forum in Tanzania, assess potential challenges associated with organizing similar forums, and seek recommendations on how to develop future forums or national HIV/AIDS conference. Participants reported several benefits of the HIV/AIDS Research Forum, starting with the ability to bring together stakeholders from different sectors and a variety of institutions, providing non-researchers and policy makers an opportunity to learn about different ongoing HIV/AIDS-related research and collaborate with researchers to translate research into policies. Other benefits of the forum included the brainstorming session to identify challenges of organizing future HIV/AIDS research dissemination forums, and gather recommendations on how to overcome the challenges of planning similar HIV/AIDS research dissemination forums and developing a national conference.

The main perceived benefit of this HIV/AIDS research dissemination forum was regarding the variety of people from different sectors in attendance because having people from different ministries and policy makers enhance the chance of translating the research findings into policies and adoption of interventions to public health and clinical practice settings [23]. This finding is supported by another

study conducted in Botswana which found that the inclusion of high-level government representatives from different ministries in the Madikwe Forum has fostered a platform for informed discussion about HIV-related programming and implementation that have been helpful in reducing bottlenecks that can prevent timely and effective implementation of projects [24]. The ability for different groups of individuals with different backgrounds and expertise to come together can also allow researchers to better understand how policy makers work and vice versa. Research has shown that policy makers in Tanzania face a variety of complex and political nature of HIV-related policymaking that can prevent the translation of research into policies [25]. These challenges may be unknown to researchers and other groups and the forum can be an opportunity for policy makers to share more about the policy making processes and policy makers can also learn how to work with different groups and organizations such as faith-based organizations that may not be responding positively to current policies [26]. Having a better understanding of how the different sectors work can allow more collaborative efforts towards HIV prevention as reported by members of the Madikwe Forum [24]. Another benefit of the forum was that participants also had a chance to discuss potential challenges and recommendations on to address the challenges for the forum or national conference to be sustainable.

The challenges identified focused on the potential poor attendance of policy makers and other non-researchers because of the abstract requirements, the lack of new presentations if the forum is held too frequently, the lack of coordination between organizations involved in HIV/AIDS-related activities, and the costs associated with hosting the forum and potential national HIV/AIDS conference. The potential poor attendance of policy makers and different ministries is a valid concern, especially for researchers, since policy makers have the decision-making power but are not usually present in research meetings. Recommendations to enhance attendance from policy makers and non-researchers included the removal of the abstract requirement. Another recommendation that can improve attendance is having the meeting every two years. Findings from the study in Botswana showed that that attendance from high-level government representatives was low due to the possible frequent meetings that the Madikwe Forum held [24]. The lack of new presentations and not having enough time to complete tasks were also identified as an issue in the Madikwe Forum when [24]. Furthermore, the recommendation to have the forum or conference every two years would reduce the costs associated with planning and hosting the event and allow TACAIDS and other organizations more time to raise the funds needed to attenuate some of the costs. Researchers will also have more time to seek or receive funding to develop new projects and have a higher chance of having new findings to present. Other necessary recommendations that can help increase attendance and make the forum and future conference sustainable are the need for better cross-organizational collaborations and the preference for discussion-based presentations instead of those filled with scientific terms and statistics.

Limitations

Despite the strengths of the study, there are some limitations worth highlighting. The challenges and recommendations do not represent the views of several stakeholders and organizations involved in HIV/AIDS research dissemination that were not present at the forum. In addition, the majority of the

research team members are researchers and not policy makers. Therefore, the interpretation of the results may be influenced by the research team members' background. The other limitation was that the recording from the brainstorming session proved to be difficult to decipher at times. To address this issue, multiple members of the team listened and re-transcribe segments of the audio that were difficult to decipher.

Conclusion

Commentary from the brainstorming session of the HIV/AIDS Research Dissemination Forum was analyzed to identify perceived benefits of the first HIV/AIDS Research Forum in Tanzania and potential challenges and recommendations to address the challenges of having future forums and developing a national HIV/AIDS conference. Recommendations identified in this study such as the need of securing potential funding to increase attendance, taking away the abstract requirement in order to increase a diversity of perspectives and a biennial periodicity of the conference to avoid repetition can be used to guide the organization of future HIV/AIDS Research Forums and inform activities not only in Tanzania but also in other low-income countries interested in developing a national HIV/AIDS conference to disseminate research findings and engage stakeholders from different sectors.

Abbreviations

ART: Antiretroviral Therapy; BMF: Benjamin Mkapa Foundation; CDC: Centers for Disease Control & Prevention; CTC: Care and Treatment Centers; EGPAF: Elizabeth Glaser Pediatric AIDS Foundation; HIV: Human Immunodeficiency Virus; HIVST: HIV Self-Testing; HTS: HIV Testing Services; ICAP: International Centre for AIDS Care and Treatment Program; MLWH: Men Living with HIV; MOHCDGEC: Ministry of Health, Community Development, Gender, Elderly, and Children; NACOPHA: National Council for People Living with HIV and AIDS; NACP: National AIDS Control Program; NCD: Non-Communicable Diseases; NIH: National Institutes of Health; PLWH: People Living with HIV; SSA: Sub-Saharan Africa; STEP: Self-Testing Education & Promotion; TACAIDS: Tanzania Commission for AIDS; UNAIDS: Joint United Nations Program on HIV/AIDS; UNFPA: United Nations Population Fund; VMCC: Voluntary Medical Male Circumcision; WHO: World Health Organization.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate: Ethical approval was not needed according to the Office of Research Compliance at the University of South Carolina. Verbal informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection.

Consent for publication: Not Applicable

Availability of data and material: The datasets used and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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- [Appendix1COREQ.docx](#)