



Photo: TB HIV Care Association

INTRODUCING AND DEVELOPING HARM REDUCTION STRATEGIES IN SOUTH AFRICA

This case study was conducted by the TB/HIV Care Association, which works to prevent, find and treat TB and HIV in communities in South Africa. Partly through funding and support from Bridging the Gaps Alliance partner Mainline, TB/HIV Care and its partner OUT Wellbeing (providing direct health services to LGBT people, MSM, sex workers, and injecting drug users) have established a joint programme for people who inject drugs (PWID). Bridging the Gaps played a key role in the initial procurement of sterile injecting equipment, enabling the launch of the project, and has continued to support Step Up's advocacy for the human rights of PWID.

Background

This case study illustrates how TB/HIV Care Association (THCA), and its partner OUT Wellbeing (OUT), have implemented the Step Up Project, an innovative joint initiative to support PWID in South Africa.

The **criminalisation and stigmatisation** that PWID experience in South Africa, combined with a fear of using health services due to the criminalisation of PWID, has contributed to the widespread use of **unsafe injecting practices**, such as the sharing and improper use of injecting equipment. In addition to facing stigma and discrimination from health service providers and the public, PWID also face abuse by law enforcement agencies.

FACTS & FIGURES:

- South Africa has an adult HIV prevalence rate of 19.2%.
- PWID are particularly vulnerable to HIV and other blood-borne infections through the sharing of injecting equipment. There are an estimated 67,000 PWID in South Africa, with an estimated HIV prevalence rate of 19.4%.
- A 2013 UNODC study confirmed that PWID in South Africa were engaging in risky injecting behaviour: 49% reported having used contaminated injecting equipment the last time they injected.

The prevalence of high-risk injecting practices identified by a United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC) 2013 study, indicated that **services were urgently required** to address the potential public health impact of injecting drug use, and improve the wellbeing of PWID.

Bridging the Gaps is an international HIV programme on health and rights for LGBT people, sex workers and people who use drugs, currently operating in 15 countries around the world. For more information on the programme, please visit hivgaps.org

BRIDGING THE GAPS
Health and rights  for key populations

The Step Up Project

Motivated by the findings from the 2013 UNODC study, and concerned by the lack of rights-affirming, evidence-based interventions aimed at reducing HIV infection and improving health outcomes for PWID, THCA and OUT set out to provide HIV prevention and harm reduction services to PWID.

The development of the Step Up project involved an **intensive process of consultation and engagement** with the PWID community and government and civil society stakeholders, guided by the fundamental principle of 'Nothing About Us Without Us'. PWID were invited to discuss their needs and experiences, exposing the most pressing concerns for PWID to be lack of access to sterile injecting equipment and effective treatment options, and human rights abuses by police.

The project was launched in June 2015, and provides most elements of the comprehensive package of evidence-based HIV- prevention interventions recommended by the World Health Organisation and UNODC to the PWID community in Durban (THCA), Cape Town (THCA), and Pretoria (OUT).

“ I am now in a position to influence the relevant people with what I have done and seen. To change their minds: not everyone who takes drugs on the street are useless and can do nothing. I will fight this fight until I die. We need more people to practice and believe in harm reduction. We need to show that more people can use drugs in a way that does not impact negatively on themselves or other people. ”

Step Up Project participant

The project has several components

Outreach teams are attached to fixed wellness centres in both Durban and Cape Town (which also serve sex workers) and to a unique, integrated key-populations clinic in Pretoria, also serving MSM and LGBTI people. Several outreach workers are current PWID, or former PWID on opioid substitution therapy (OST).

Outreach teams provide community-based services, including needle and syringe programmes, HIV testing and counselling, behaviour change interventions (BCIs), the provision of educational materials (IEC), and condom and lube distribution. Outreach occurs at high traffic or easily accessible locations, identified through a formal mapping process. Teams in Durban and Cape Town operate from mobile clinics, the Pretoria team uses cars and portable HIV testing stations.

PWID are directly and meaningfully involved in service delivery as peer educators. The community also **meaningfully participates and engages in advocacy** for health services, policy reform, and the human rights of PWID. Set-up and ongoing logistics support has also been provided to South Africa's first drug user networks – Drug Users of Gauteng (DUG) and the Cape Town Network of People Who Use Drugs (CaNPUD) – advocating for the rights of PWUD through engagement with government, civil society and the media.

RESULTS

- Step Up has ensured a **continuous supply of sterile injecting equipment** to approximately 4,000 PWID in South Africa. The project tests more than 300 PWID for HIV per month, and to date has provided equipment for more than 1 million sterile injections.
- Step Up has contributed to the representation and involvement of PWUD in **national policy decisions**, including the development of the National Strategic Plan and National Drug Master Plan. The project has also engaged in activities such as organising the PWUD and Harm Reduction Zone at the 21st International AIDS Conference, hosting the now annual South Africa Drug Policy Week, and documenting information on human rights violations for advocacy
- The project has ensured the **meaningful involvement and engagement of the PWID community** in each aspect, including service delivery, consultation, and advocacy. Establishment of the two drug user networks has given an organised voice to PWUD in South Africa. As a result, many PWID have both found acceptance and accessible care appropriate to their needs, and gained dignity and hope for the future thanks to speaking out on behalf of their community.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Engaging constructively with law enforcement agencies** is essential. Police actions, including threats of arrest and actual arrests of staff, and destruction or confiscation of injecting equipment, have undermined the effectiveness of the project, and contributed to the sharing and reuse of injecting equipment. The most effective way to manage such risks is through national and local engagement with police, both individually and as a whole, departments of health, and other policymakers. Fruitful relationships with other key local stakeholders, such as city and provincial departments of health, police stations, clinics, and existing community and civil society forums are vital.
2. Long lasting societal change requires **supportive policy reform**. Health services are most effective in an enabling environment where drug policies contribute to good health outcomes for PWUD. TB/HIV Care Association successfully advocates for a voice in the development of national policies on drugs and HIV, and facilitates the meaningful involvement of PWUD in these processes.
3. It's vital to work towards **wider understanding of harm reduction** and drug policy reform, and building best practices. Step Up staff members have held workshops and lectures on the project and its innovation, for law enforcement officials, medical professionals and policymakers.

MAINline

