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Abstract

'Political will' and leadership are increasingly considered key contextual influences on the outcomes HIV/AIDS programmes in sub-Saharan Africa. Such debates tend to focus on the role of national leadership in shaping responses to the epidemic, with little attention to local leaders. Yet many of the settings in which HIV/AIDS flourishes are geographically distant from the reach of national leadership and policies. Furthermore local leaders often play a key role in shaping how national policies and decisions are interpreted and implemented in local areas. Against this background, we present a case study of the impact of the leadership style of a traditional chief on a community-based AIDS programme in a South African rural community, which sought to build community-level 'AIDS competence', using the 'empowerment via participation' approach. The case study involved 134 interviews and 57 focus-groups conducted over three years. Thematic content analysis revealed a number of direct and indirect ways in which his leadership style impacted on project outcomes. Despite his strong support for the programme, the Chief's 'traditional' attitudes to women and youth, his celebration of polygamy, and his authoritarian governance style undermined the project's 'empowerment via participation' agenda – especially the programme's attempts to reduce AIDS stigma, to build female and youth capacity to control their sexual health, and to encourage men to take responsibility for their role in tackling AIDS.

Key words: Political will, Leadership, Traditional leaders, Gender, HIV/AIDS, South Africa

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INTRODUCTION

Growing attention is being paid to leadership and 'political will' as key contextual factors shaping the outcomes HIV/AIDS management efforts in sub-Saharan Africa (UN AIDS, 2006; WHO, 2008). To date such discussions have tended to focus on national leadership (Bor, 2007; Parkhurst and Lush, 2004). Yet many of the settings in which HIV/AIDS flourishes are geographically distant from the reach of national leadership and policies – in the context of relatively weak state structures. Furthermore local leaders often play a key role in shaping how national policies and decisions are interpreted and implemented in local areas.

We present on a case study of a community-led HIV/AIDS programme in Stoneyridge, a rural South African community, where local leadership style emerged as a key influence on how AIDS was perceived and managed. Rural areas are home to 65% of people in Sub-Saharan Africa, and 45% of South Africans. Whilst HIV-prevalence rates tend to be lower in rural than urban areas, rural households carry the burden of care of migrants returning home to die. Furthermore, rural people often have restricted access to hospitals, clinics and treatment. The demands of AIDS care often lead to the physical and psychological burnout of carers, family breakdown and destruction of household economies.

The Stoneyridge Project

Stoneyridge (a pseudonym) is a remote area covering 300 square kilometres, located some distance from towns and workplaces. Its 21 000 inhabitants struggle against poverty and drought, low literacy and few opportunities for paid work. Distance and transport costs limit access to formal health services and anti-retroviral treatment, in a context where 35% of pregnant women are HIV positive. Unpaid and poorly trained health volunteers provide the only help and support available to many dying of AIDS. Whilst AIDS deaths are

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common, stigma is rife, deterring many from seeking what little help is available.

The wider context of this paper is the Stoneybridge Project, a three-year intervention (2004-2007) which sought to strengthen the capacity of local residents to respond more effectively to AIDS. Run by an external NGO with foreign funding, its goal was to build local initiative and capacity to deliver HIV-prevention and AIDS-care services through a three pronged project: firstly to train volunteers in peer education and home-based nursing skills; secondly to build support structures for the volunteers, both within the community and with appropriate government health and welfare agencies and NGOs in the wider region; thirdly to use project involvement in the project as a springboard for the more general empowerment of women and youth participants (disproportionately affected by HIV/AIDS) through enhancing their project management skills, their ability to access support and resources from outside government agencies and appropriate NGOs, and their capacity to participate in wider community decision-making.

These goals were framed by a wider commitment to developing an 'AIDS competent community' (Campbell *et al.*, 2007; Nhamo *et al.*, this volume) in which local people would be most likely to work collaboratively for behaviour change, stigma reduction and optimal support for people with AIDS and their carers. Such a setting provides opportunities for the development of appropriate knowledge and skills, as well as 'transformative social spaces' (Campbell and Scott, 2010) in which local people can engage in dialogue with liked and trusted peers. Ideally such dialogue provides opportunities for community members to: develop critical understandings of how culture, poverty and gender inequalities hinder effective community responses to AIDS; develop a sense of 'ownership' of the problem rather than waiting passively for outsiders to solve it; identify and develop confidence in local individual and group strengths for tackling HIV/AIDS; and identify and network with outside agencies best equipped to support them in responding more effectively to the challenges of prevention and care.

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This approach is consistent with the fairly standard 'empowerment via participation' agenda of South African and international AIDS policy. Our case study examines how local leadership styles and practices facilitated or hindered the progress of the project, directly and indirectly. By 'direct' impact we refer to the contribution of Stoneyridge's traditional chief to project activities. 'Indirectly' we examine the extent to which the chief's general leadership style contributed to a social environment that was supportive of the development of AIDS competence.

Leadership in Stoneyridge

Stoneyridge is one of 270 South African areas governed by a dual leadership system, with power shared between elected municipal officials and an unelected traditional chief. Central government distributes most of the public money available to rural areas through municipality structures, giving them power over essential services (water, roads) and social development. Traditional chiefs hold the power to allocate land, resolve disputes and govern the daily lives of residents.

An uneasy tension often exists between municipal and traditional authorities, especially because municipalities are often governed by the ruling African National Congress (ANC), with most chiefs supporting the opposition Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP). Beall *et al.* (2005, 2006) outlines three ways Chiefs have negotiated this tension. Some support the ANC and work comfortably with local municipalities. Some, less favourably disposed to the ANC, take a pragmatic approach, reluctantly co-operating with municipalities to maximise their access to resources for their local areas. Others, including the Stoneyridge chief, actively work to limit their subjects' access to municipal services and resources, hoping that they will eventually win the wider fight by traditional leaders to control what are currently municipal resources (Oomen, 2005).

Ntsebeza (2006) roots the authority of chiefs in their power to allocate or withhold land from their subjects. Land is obviously a vital resource where

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people depend on subsisdence farming for survival. However, much of Stoneyridge is hilly and stony, particularly difficult to farm in recent years of drought. There is growing discontent, particularly amongst the youth. In such a context, the Chief has fallen back on his role as 'custodian of tradition' to hold power and authority. His celebration of traditional social relations including polygamy, bridewealth, obedient women, disciplined youth and the absolute authority of the chief and his headmen, is enthusiastically embraced by many subjects, particularly older people and men.

Methodology

Our three-year longitudinal study of the Stoneybridge Project took the form of 134 interviews and 57 focus group discussions (including 279 participants) with a wide range of local residents, as well as 70 fieldworker diaries. Research informants included volunteer health workers, traditional and religious leaders, young people in and out of school, local men and women, and members of local community groups (including groups relating to church activities, sewing, gardening, football and youth clubs). These interviews were conducted, audio-taped and translated into English by two experienced Zulu-speaking fieldworkers. Data analysis was conducted by the author of this paper and a research assistant, and involved a detailed reading and re-reading of the large dataset in the interests of identifying information on the following three broad topics: the Chief's leadership style, its direct impact on Project progress, and its indirect impact on project progress. These topics form the headings of our 'Findings' section below.

FINDINGS

The Chief's Leadership Style

Many Stoneyridge residents spoke proudly of the Chief as educated and charismatic man, articulate, worldly and wealthy, a descendant of a

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distinguished lineage of chiefs. Particularly older people and men spoke approvingly of his strict authoritarian style, and his effective control of crime. They cited his emphasis on traditional culture as a tremendous source of positive social cohesion in an uncertain social world. The Chief was associated with positive social development in his two particular areas fo interest: schooling and football. As a result of all these factors he commanded huge respect as a unifying force.

The Chief's Direct Support for the Project

From the outset, the Chief welcomed the Stoneyridge Project, allowing it to operate freely on the strict condition that it was apolitical. The Project had many achievements. Volunteers were trained to deliver home-nursing, young people to deliver peer education. Some progress was made in linking local health volunteers to public sector and NGO support agencies outside fo the community. Given the chief's supreme power to control every aspect of access to and life in Stoneyridge, these achievements would have been impossible without his active support, and his nomination of a trusted local headman to facilitate project activities on his behalf.

For the Project's first two years, he supported the project from a distance. In its third year he arranged for the Project to support his five wives in AIDS-awareness, and attended their 'graduation ceremony' (the formal distribution of training certificates at a high profile social event), and attended the opening of the Project's drop-in centre. This was a key boost for project activities in the face of the stigma and denial which constantly challenged its progress. At both events he gave eloquent speeches praising the Project's work.

However, whilst project workers were jubilant at his involvement, it was also clear that his style of engagement was at variance with the project's empowerment goals. A key goal was to build the capacity of local people, especially women, to take control of their own lives and their own sexuality. Yet it turned out that he had not consulted the wives about participating in the

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training. They were extremely agitated when the Project trainer arrived to discuss the timing of the course. Furthermore, in his speeches at project events he frequently referred to his five wives and four girlfriends in a humorous celebration of his masculinity:

In his speech at the wives graduation, the Chief said they needed to be taught about AIDS so they should not blame him when any of them got infected. He confidently asserted that polygamy had nothing to do with AIDS: 'If I am faithful to all of my wives and they are faithful to me, who is going to infect any of us with HIV?' he asked. He also said that it was mostly the youth, and gay men, that were infected and they didn't practice polygamy. So people must stop saying polygamy increased the chance of infection. The headmen and other men agreed with him, laughing at his clever way of justifying himself. (Fieldworker diary)

Project workers, who battled to involve headmen and adult men in project activities saw the Chief's ability to engage male interest through jokes about masculinity as a useful way of getting men to start talking about AIDS. However a more analytical perspective suggested that his humorous discussions of AIDS sent out confusing messages that contradicted the project's goal of getting men to take greater responsibility for their role in spreading it, and empowering women to be more assertive about using condoms with polygamous or unfaithful husbands. To quote further from the Fieldworker diary:

In his speech, the Chief also referred to his four girlfriends, saying this was the first time he had referred to them openly in front of his wives……. He said he doesn't encourage any of them to do family planning, saying: 'When I am dead, I don't want God to say I still have unborn children inside me.'

He frequently aired his views of 'correct behaviour': sexual abstinence for young people, faithfulness of wives, and multiple partners for men (who would not be at risk of HIV so long as their virtuous wives and girlfriends were faithful to them). He disapproved of condom use by youth, saying that they should protect themselves with 'good behaviour', and advocated frequent virginity testing of girls as the best method of HIV-prevention amongst youth.

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He played an active role in policing and punishing young women who wore jeans, justifying his determination to control their attire as part of his commitment to culture, tradition and respect. As discussed by a group of health volunteers:

If we wear jeans, the Chief chases us and beats us with a whip. He says its only prostitutes that wear jeans…… Older people and the headmen report us to him if they see us wearing jeans. (Health volunteers focus group)

His commitment to a highly conservative interpretation of culture and tradition shaped the focus of his messages about AIDS. Its heavy emphasis on the control and submission of youth and women stood at variance to the Project's interest in promoting women's empowerment.

Indirect Impact of Community Leadership on the Project

The project did not achieve its goals of involving widespread participation of local people in its work, or of using AIDS service work as a springboard for the social development or empowerment of youth or women. After three years, there was no increase in women's confidence to negotiate safer sexual encounters, even amongst health volunteers. The project continued to be dominated by a powerful older man, although nearly all the volunteers were younger women. Clearly many factors fed into such disappointments, including the peoples' growing unwillingness to act as unpaid volunteers, and the poor support of external health and welfare agencies. These fall beyond the scope of this paper, which is limited to how the local style of leadership impacted on project efforts. We now turn to examine the strategies used by the Chief to consolidate his power, and how these framed the social environment in which the Project was located.

Exclusion of 'ANC elements' from Stoneyridge*:* As repeatedly reported by the health volunteers, the historical rivalry between the ruling ANC, and the Chief's more traditional IFP, impacted on the Project in many indirect ways:

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The Chief likes development but he won't accept ideas coming from other areas, saying that they are 'politically motivated'. Before anything can be done here it has to be studied very carefully to make sure it won't further the interests of other political parties. (Health volunteer)

Fear of being 'accused' of being an ANC supporter limited the development of initiative by local people, and of the development of critical debate about how the local status of women and youth undermined their opportunities for sexual health.

Ideology of self-reliance: One of the ways in which the Chief steered his subjects away from seeking out municipal resources was through his ideology of 'self-reliance'. As he stated in an interview:

My vision for this community is one of self-reliance. People need to pick themselves up out of their poverty rather than waiting for help to come to them. (Interview with Chief)

This ideology works well in some areas of community life. Local people had worked for no pay to build schools and football fields. However health volunteers suggested it was less appropriate in other settings:

Our chief says people should survive through growing food. But its dry, nothing grows. He hasn't visited the households or seen the poverty affecting us. (Volunteer)

He refused to allow us to accept food parcels from the municipality for people with AIDS, saying people should be given seeds, not handouts. Yet some people are too sick to grow seeds. (Volunteer)

Selective use of democratic consultation: Whilst the chief exercised strict control over peoples' personal and political lives, he was a model of consultative democracy in relation to economic and social development. As a headman reported in an interview, the chief frequently said that the reason for the poor development of Stoneyridge related to lack of initiative by his subjects:

Our Chief likes development, he wants to know peoples' views on how to achieve it. He says he finds it difficult to lead a community where people don't say what they want. (Headman)

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Whilst he expressed strong commitment to the rhetoric of democracy, the empowerment of youth and women and social development through delegation of power to headmen and local development committee's, his style of delegation ensured that none of these groups became a significant force in the community. This point was emphasised in a focus group with local men:

In reality, the headmen have no real power. In reality its only the Chief who can take any initiative. (Adult men)

Many community members revered the Chief and scapegoated the Headmen for lack of progress.

If you have a good idea for community involvement, you can't go directly to the Chief. He will tell you to approach him through the correct channels – the headmen. However the Headmen have destructive attitudes. If they think your idea is not a good one, they don't pass it on. And lacking knowledge, they feel threatened by peoples' demands. (Volunteers)

Interviews with headmen themselves supported the claim that they lacked skills and confidence:

Most of us are illiterate. If we were more educated, the community would have a lot more development. (Headman)

(Where is the drought relief people applied for?) We don't know. We are just blank, nobody explains anything. We just distribute the forms people must fill in. (Perhaps the Chief has information about this?) Nobody has asked him. We are just signing something we don't know anything about. (Headman)

Another way the Chief 'shares' power with people is through delegating responsibility for the development of electricity, irrigation plans and so on to committees of local people. Yet these committees had unskilled and poorly networked members. Furthermore people repeated said that those ideas that were generated by the committees didn't ever see the light of day. Ideas were taken to the Headmen to relay to the Chief, but never heard of again.

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Exclusion of youth: The Chief frequently spoke of the importance of youth involvement in community projects:

I ensure that the youth play a big role in this community. (Chief)

However, here again there was a strong gap between rhetoric and reality. Youth frequently expressed their frustration with this situation in interviews and focus groups:

Youth are included by name, not in practice. They don't let youth get involved in real issues that would empower them with skills and knowledge. I am one of the five youth reps on the agriculture project. But they haven't given us any opportunities. One of the adults has done all the work we should have been included in. (Young man)

Youth attendance at meetings did not automatically mean they would be allowed to speak.

They hold community meetings at the Tribal Court to discuss important matters. When we as youth raise our hands to say something, the chairperson says: 'Put your hands down, you are spoiling the meeting.' (Young man)

Adults and community leaders frequently cited tradition as their justification for high levels of adult control of young people:

This is a good place to live because of respect and traditional customs – youth are under the control of adults. (Headman)

Young people repeatedly said any criticism of the status quo was suppressed not only by traditional norms, but also by parental fear that rebellious children would lead to the Chief evicting the family from the community.

We depend on our parents for survival. If you talk the truth, perhaps express frustration at the local leadership, your parents will throw you out. We are forced to keep quiet because we need a place to sleep, we have nowhere else to go. (Unemployed young man)

A teacher commented that there was no space to challenge the status quo:

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A person who challenged the strict adherence to traditional culture would be like a drop in the ocean. Those who live here accept this way of life. Those who do not, leave. (Teacher)

As a result, youth who are able to leave the community for the relative freedom of the urban areas – those with education and job skills – tend to do so. With youth unemployment at 53%, many lack such options. Many young people said this situation served to paralyse any independent activity on their part:

People are not free to do things. At one time we considered going to the municipality offices for help to get a soccer field. But we feared the Chief would think we were undermining him rather than appreciating the initiative we were taking. (Young man)

The only youth involvement that was encouraged in the HIV/AIDS arena was tradition-linked. Thus for example in the only ward where the Headman allowed youth to hold AIDS-related meetings related to plans to revive the Reed Dances, traditional ceremonies celebrating young girls' virginity.

The exclusion of women*:* The Chief had a strongly expressed commitment to the formal education of girls. Despite this, various factors served to exclude young women from public life. Young girls were expected to prioritise household chores over education, and their participation in community life was very restricted. Such attitudes often inhibited their development of economic independence, and limited their freedom to resist sexual advances by older men. As one schoolgirl commented in a focus group:

The Headman force us to love them. We can't even complain to our parents. If a man has many cattle, they say we must accept his proposal (of sex). Our fathers are the worst here. If our mothers support us in disagreeing with what the Headmen are doing, they threaten to chase us out with our mothers. (Schoolgirl)

In interviews, the Chief repeatedly spoke of the pivotal role of women in community survival.

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Most projects in this area are initiated by women. As long as there is a woman in the house the family survives and the children thrive. When a woman leaves or ideas, the family suffers. (Chief)

He was also vocal about the importance of female leaders. However he defined their roles very narrowly in terms of women-specific issues, such as organising Reed Dances, training girls to 'behave themselves' and helping male leaders adjudicate in disputes that involved women. Restrictions on women were keenly felt by the Project's women volunteers, who repeatedly spoke of their work being undermined by their gender at every turn.

In short, it appeared that day to day survival Stoneyridge depended on the efforts of women. Yet, as many interviews suggested, the power of these very women was constrained by 'cultural' and biological interpretations of their rights and roles, which defined any power that they might have as subordinate to men:

A woman is something you pay cattle (bride-wealth) for. Thereafter you can treat her anyhow. (Adult woman)

If a woman goes against a man's rule, she must be punished. (Adult man)

As female leaders we have problems when we menstruate. I may have something urgent to say, but can't stand in front of a man in that condition. I have to ask someone to stand in for me. (Female Headman)

Conclusion

In the face of widespread acceptance of community participation and empowerment as key pillars of HIV/AIDS management, both internationally and in South Africa, this paper has sought to advance our understandings of the wider social contexts that enable or hinder efforts to implement 'empowerment via participation' approaches. It has done so through a case study of the direct and indirect impacts of local leadership styles on efforts to develop 'AIDS competence' (Campbell *et al.*, 2007) in a South African rural

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community, with particular focus on the way in which the traditional Chief influenced the progress of the project.

The impacts of his direct involvement were complex and contradictory in many ways. On the one hand, he provided the project with vital community access and support, enabling it to function in the community and appointing a respected community elder to facilitate its progress. He attended project events in a way that strongly boosted its profile in the community, serving to engage the attention of headmen and men, two important and hard-to-mobilise groups.

On the other hand, some might describe him as a negative role model for a sexual health project through his celebration of his own polygamy. Furthermore it could be argued that his insistence that polygamy does not facilitate the spread of HIV/AIDS, his opposition to condoms, and his strong commitment to the values of outdated and unrealistic 'traditional' values of sexual abstinence by youth people (where regular AIDS deaths of young people reveal their unrealistic nature) did not contribute to the project's goal of creating a social climate where sexually active young people and women in polygamous unions would feel confident to seek out information about how to protect their sexual health – and insist on their rights to safer sexual relationships. Such views also feed into the stigmatisation and denial of HIV/AIDS due to their association of HIV/AIDS with 'bad behaviour', undermining the project's efforts to create a humane and supportive climate for people living with AIDS and their carers, and increasing their reluctance to seek out the help and support that might be available to them.

The paper has also highlighted the indirect impact of his leadership style on the project's goals. These included his dislike of political opposition and debate, his top-down and authoritarian approach to his subjects, the gap between the rhetoric and reality of female and youth empowerment, and his self-styled role as champion of conservative traditional norms. These stifled the debate and innovative thinking needed to tackle an epidemic, and the development of confidence by youth and women (the most seriously AIDS-

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affected groups) to develop understandings of the ways in which unfavourable social circumstances undermine their sexual health, and to develop a confident vision of how they might resist or at least ameliorate the negative effects of these circumstances on their well-being.

Epidemics spread because existing social understandings and practices, and existing public health systems, are inadequate for stemming the processes through which they spread. One important aspect of challenging them requires innovation and change to frameworks of understanding, action and intervention in affected communities. Traditional leaders need to be involved in AIDS management in rural areas. Yet the goals of AIDS projects may contradict constructions of 'traditional' values from which they derive their power in ways that limit the types of 'thinking outside the box' that characterise AIDS competence.

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