

**THE CHURCH FORUM
ON HIV & AIDS**

2021 ANNUAL REPORT



Reporting Period:

JANUARY - DECEMBER 2021

Organization Background

The Eswatini Church Forum on HIV/AIDS is a non-governmental institution formed through an accord ratified by the five main church bodies in the Kingdom of Eswatini, namely; Council of Eswatini Churches, the League of African Churches, the Eswatini Conference of Churches, the Eswatini Conference of the Seventh Day Adventist Church, the International Tabernacle Ministries as well as other Faith based organizations categorized as non-affiliated churches. It was founded in 1999 as a strategic initiative by the multi-sectorial HIV/AIDS response unit in the country.

Vision

An HIV/AIDS free Eswatini through an effective and coordinated response by the church.

Mission

To champion the Christian HIV & AIDS response through coordinated and comprehensive intervention strategies at National, Regional, and Local church level.

HIGHLIGHTS OF 2021

STRENGTHENING THE CHURCHES IN THE FIGHT AGAINST HIV AND AIDS AND GENDER BASED VIOLENCE, CONTINUATION

Project Area: Manzini, Hhohho, Lubombo and Shiselweni

INTRODUCTION

One of the interventions that the Church Forum has implemented extensively in recent years is dealing with stigma and discrimination, especially in churches. Scripture verses are usually misquoted to target PLHIV and this results in PLHIV defaulting treatment due to fear of disclosure leading to lack of support and discrimination. However, the project has realized that still stigma and discrimination still persist in our communities, both at family level and even at the Church level. One of the objectives of establishing the Church forum on HIV and AIDS was to establish rapport among churches and church leaders so that all Christian can address HIV and AIDS issues with one voice. The project also aims to reduce poverty in the church.

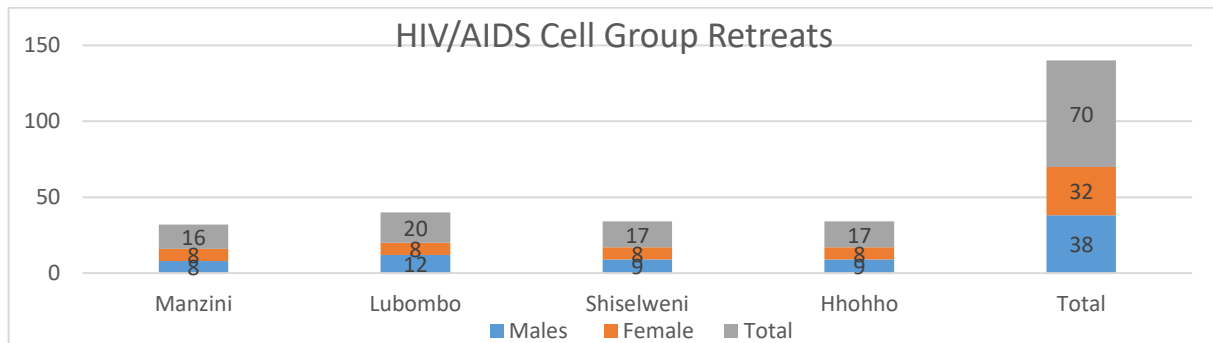
RADIO PROGRAMME

The radio show has continuously been broadcasting information that will provide good advice to the church on health and other issues. This quarter, the main focus was on the youth in the church. Topics covered include;

- The Children's protection and Welfare Acts 2012, the protection of children, the rights of children and social services available for children.
- Advocate for the reduction of stigma and discrimination of children with disabilities and special needs
- Sexual Reproductive Health and Rights (Teenage pregnancy, Decision making, Hygiene, sexual gender based violence, HIV and Sexual Transmitted infections)
- SODV Act 2018
- HIV treatment, prevention and disclosure
- October was the cancer month and the Cancer unit was hosted the whole month to raise awareness on cancer.
- 16 Days of activism

HIV/AIDS CELL GROUPS RETREATS

In order to reach church leaders and their spouses, the project facilitated 4 regional retreats for couples who met to discuss how they will encourage their congregants to deal with stigma and discrimination and gender based violence in their churches. The church leaders were from 40 different churches (10 churches in each region). The Ministry of Health, People living with HIV and The Manzini Police one stop center was engaged to train the couples on HIV 101, Sexual gender based violence, Child protection and Sexual offences & Domestic Violence Act 2021. Below is a diagram of the church leaders reached in each region:



After the church leaders had been empowered with tools to deal with stigma in their churches, they were tasked to share what they had learnt in their churches.

HIV/AIDS PREVENTION MEETINGS

Church Leaders conducted meetings in their churches to promote the prevention of the HIV among church members. The organization then organized different speakers to be hosted by churches to speak on HIV and GBV in the church. The meetings were conducted at Hhukwini, Nhlangano, Sidwashini, Jubukweni, Malkerns and Motjane. The Aids Health Foundation (AHF) to provide HIV testing to church members, positive clients were referred to the nearest health facilities to initiate to ART and negative clients were referred for HIV prevention service like condoms, PREP and voluntary male circumcision. More meetings are still to be conducted in other churches. Congregants were happy that the services are brought to them at church level.

NATIONAL PLANNING AND COORDINATION MEETING

On this meeting the strategic plan of Church Forum 2014 -2019 was reviewed and a new strategy was established. As part of information sharing, there was a validation meeting for the new Church Forum Strategy for 2020-2025 which was presented to church leaders who were present in the meeting.

ADVOCACY MEETING FOR GOVERNMENT SUPPORT

There was an advocacy meeting on the 9th of June 2021, where Church Forum and Faith based organizations (FBOs) engaged the Government of the kingdom of Eswatini on a number of issues, including how the government can support the work of religious and faith based organizations through a grant. The purpose of the meeting was to position Church Forum as an organization that the government can use in the provision of basic services to the people especially on addressing Health communication in faith based organization. Different government ministries were represented and said they will find a way to work with the organization after receiving information on the work of Church Forum and the other FBOs.

SAVINGS AND CREDIT GROUPS MONITORING AND DEVELOPMENT

There are now 22 Savings and credit groups that are fully functional. The savings groups have continued to meet monthly to save and borrow money at an interest of 10%. In November and December the cycle of the savings group ended and the groups had to share the money saved. The total savings groups for all the group was E1, 968, 116.39 Developing new groups in some communities has been a challenges because of the high number of people that are unemployed. Covid-19 has worsen thing were other people lost their jobs.

ESWATINI FAITH COMMUNITY INITIATIVE (FCI)

PROJECT AREA: Manzini, Shiselweni, Lubombo and Hhohho

INTRODUCTION

The Kingdom of Eswatini is one of the ten countries that benefited from the U.S President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) fund that was allocated for faith based initiatives. The initiative is called Faith and Community Initiative (FCI). The main purpose of FCI is to address key gaps toward achieving HIV epidemic control and ensuring justice for children, including leveraging the unique capacities and compassion of faith-based organizations and communities. In Eswatini the Project is coordinated by Eswatini Church Forum (ECF) in collaboration with the Eswatini Ministry of Health (MoH) and implementing partners (URC-DOD, TLC, PSI and MOH-COAG).

FCI Technical Working Group (TWG) Progress reporting Meeting

The TWG for the project conducted monthly meetings to share progress report on Priority 1 (HIV 101), and Priority 2_Protection of Sexual violence against children (PSVAC), FCI GAPS and FCI priorities. In the meeting the implementing partners meeting to share progress reports on the project.

HIV 101

Cares and Church Health committees were trained on HIV and work closely with church leaders to provide HIV testing services, HIV prevention services, Distribute messages of hope and prevention of sexual violence against children in churches. Using a screening tool HIV-Self Testing (HIVST) kits were distributed to church and community members. Clients accessing HIV self-testing kits were registered clients, those who tested positive are referred to the nearest health facility and negative clients are referred for HIV prevention services. Children (2-15 years) accessed kits through their parents.

Messages Of Hope - Carers and Church Health committees were trained on the messages of hope and displayed knowledge of the 12 messages. There were given messages of hope logbook for documenting messages of hope distributed and dissemination in churches. Messages were distributed during church sessions, during meetings and true WhatsApp groups.

PREVENTION OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN (PSVAC)

Faith leaders, Carers and Church health committees from churches in the 4 regions have being trained on PSVAC so that they can provide child safeguarding services in their churches. Church congregants are also sensitized on PSVAC. Through the assistance of the implementing partners the church were provided with copies of Children's Welfare and Protection Act 2012, The sexual offences and domestic violence act 2018 and shelter guidelines for sexually violated children. Cases of gender based violence are reported by church leader or carers for investigation.

LAUNCH OF THE FAITH HEALING MESSAGES

Following the Faith Healing Indaba conducted in December 2020, Faith healing messages were established and launched in May 2021. Church leaders were commissioned by the Ministry of Home Affairs- Principal, to champion the health of their congregants and communities by sharing correct, realistic and accurate information about health and well-being to help reduce the spread of HIV/AIDS. He also advised against unscrupulous practices, myths and beliefs that compromise the health of Eswatini. He was joined by the Ministry of Health, Director of Health Services and the Acting PEPFAR Coordinator. All the different church mother bodies were prayed for the fight to reduce the spread of HIV/AIDS.

NATIONAL PREVENTION OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN (PSVAC) INDABA

The Ministry of Health Cooperative Agreement, through the Faith and Community Initiative project, hosted the National Prevention of Sexual Violence against Children (PSVAC) Indaba. The National Indaba was the last following two successful regional indaba that were held at Lubombo and Shiselweni region respectively. This indaba was exclusively for the League of African Churches and affiliates, to capacitate them about the Sexual Offenses and Domestic Violence Act of 2018 and Children Welfare and Protection Act of 2012. Church leaders committed to identify, report issues of violence against children and Gender Based Violence. They also committed to reporting such incidences.

STRENGTHENING CHURCHES TO FIGHT AGAINST COVID-19

Project Area: Manzini, Shiselweni, Hhohho and Lubombo

INTRODUCTION

Since the discovery of the first COVID-19 positive person in Eswatini, the number of cases has been gradually increasing. Many COVID-19 patients come to the health facility very late because they lack information. Church Forum has developed information, education and communication materials to support churches to stop the spread of COVID-19. This Project strengthens the Health system in the country through conducting door to door COVID 19 Screening, using the existing rural health care motivators identified from churches and neighbourhood care points.

CHURCH LEADERS SENSITIZATION MEETINGS

Sensitization meetings were conducted in the 9 target communities which are Lushikishini, Kandinda, Nkwalini, Ndzingeni, Luhhumaneni, Nyamane, Hlatsi, Phuzamoya and Mahlabaeni. 86 Church leaders were reached with information on Covid-19. A pre evaluation survey was conducted to establish a baseline on the church leaders' knowledge on Covid-19. The finding indicated lack of understanding of the basic facts of a virus. They believe that the virus can be curable and not just the symptoms. There are also gaps in the understanding of how the virus spreads and its symptoms as some of them mentioned that the virus can spread through water and mosquitos.

TRAINING OF CAREGIVERS ON COVID 19 AND HOME-BASED CARE FOR COVID

Caregivers from the 9 target communities were identified by Church Leaders to be trained on Covid-19. The workshop was in August 2021 at The Alcon House in Manzini. A total number of 18 Caregivers from attended the workshop, of which 15 were females and 3 were males. The Ministry of Health was engaged and trained the caregivers on Basic facts of Covid-19, Covid-19 vaccine and HIV/AIDS during the Covid. They were also trained on how to provide home based care to clients or family members with Covid -19. The caregiver will be provided with protective gown which they will use while working in their churches and communities.

DISTRIBUTION OF COVID-19 KITS

A total of 90 churches Kandinda, Lushikishini, Hlatsi, Nyamane, Mahlabaeni, Phuzumoya, Ndzingeni, Nkwalini and Luhhumaneni were assisted with Covid-19 kits. The kits consisted of a veronica bucket for washing hands, soap, and sanitizer, bleach and spray container. Meetings have been scheduled with church leaders to conduct meetings on Covid-19 with their church congregants.

RADIO PROGRAM

The Ministry of Health was engaged on the radio show to talk about Covid to the listeners of the show. Topics discussed include Covid-19 Basic facts on Covid-19, HIV still matter during Covid-19, coping with Covid 19 in the church coping with Covid 19 at home and coping with Covid 19 at school. More emphasis was on Covid 19 vaccinations issues which have been raise by people, there myths and misconceptions around vaccination which has lead church leaders and congregants no wanting to vaccinate. The entire content was structured in such a way that we slowly introduce complex subjects as time goes starting with the basics and introducing the audience to the subject matter.

Engagement of Men and Boys in faith communities on SRHR, HIV and SGBV in the Context of COVID 19

PROJECT AREA: Manzini, Shiselweni, Lubombo and Hhohho

INTRODUCTION

Adolescents and young people find themselves being targets of conflicting messages through their exposure to different platforms like social media. Often than not, young people tend to value messages from their teachers and peers and where these messages compete or conflict those messages adolescents get from home or church, young people find themselves confused in making significant decisions about their lives. This project seeks to develop capacity of the Churches and other religious institutions through the Church Forum on HIV/AIDS, to position SRHR, GBV & HIV issues within the religious congregations in order to promote access to crucial SRHR services through structured LSE for 8 youth networks in churches on SRHR Advocacy & leadership.

ENGAGEMENT OF FAITH LEADERS ON SRHR, HIV & SGBV

The religious leaders' engagement meeting was conducted at The Alcon House in Manzini on the 15th of July 2021. A total of 23 churches from the 4 regions were represented and they were selected from the five Church mother bodies. The purpose of the meeting was to orient the Church leaders on addressing SRHR issues with out-of-school youth and young people from their constituencies. The outcomes for this activity was: The Church leaders submit inputs on how we should structure our approach in terms of sharing SRHR content with young people in the church. The church leaders were made aware that SRHR services and education is compulsory to every young person as it is part of their basic rights.

TRAINING OF YOUTH LEADERS FROM 8 RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS ON HIV AND AIDS

The youth leaders' engagement meeting was conducted in August 2021. A total number of 32 youth leaders attended the workshop. The youth leaders were selected from the five Church mother bodies through the assistance of church leaders. The purpose of the meeting was to equip the youth leaders, especially young man and boys with facts on SRHR issues concerning out-of-school youth and young people in religious settings nationwide. During the discussions, the youth leaders showed added interest when the topics on safe sex practices were addressed, especially about condom usage. Following the workshops, we undertook a small scale survey to understand how beneficial the activities are to the young people; the results showed that they were interested in more events of this nature and are interested in topics like entrepreneurship support groups in their constituencies to address issues affecting all aspects of life for the young person.

TRAINING OF PARENTS OF YOUTH FROM 8 RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS ON HIV AND AIDS

Twenty four homestead heads from the 8 religious organizations were trained on HIV/AIDS, SRHR, Covid-19 and GBV. During the discussions, more questions were on the topics on Covid 19 and how to prevent infection were addressed, especially about effectiveness of the Covid 19 vaccines. This is due to the myths and misconceptions circulating on various uncontrolled media platforms like social media and peer to peer information sharing. Overall, the participants were happy to attend and their expectations from the workshop were met. The way forward was that the parents were advised to share what they have learnt with others from their constituencies, especially the young people in their churches.

RADIO PROGRAMME

The Organization partnered with Family Life Association (FLAS) to talk about sexual reproductive health and rights for the youth in the church on the radio programme. Young people from the youth action movement were engaged to talk about HIV prevention, Teenage pregnancy, STIs, Hygiene, Human anatomy, Relationships, Alcohol and substance abuse. The youth were also encourage to active in their communities and keep busy.

SUCSESSES IN 2021

- HIV self-testing services in the church
- There are more topics covered in the radio show
- Formation of Health committees in some churches
- Savings groups have continued meeting and older group have graduated savings groups able to save on their own
- Training of caregivers on Covid 19.
- Training of Church leaders, Homestead and youth leaders on SRHR, HIV and GBV
- Launch of the Faith Healing Messages

CHALLENGES IN 2021

- HIV positivity yield remain low (about 1%) across all ages because More people referred to care but fewer are confirmed to be linked.
- 2 Savings groups at Nkwalini had to close because members were not paying back money borrowed.
- HIV positive individual were taking the HIVSTK to retest themselves
- PrEP uptake remains low across all ages.