Challenges And Opportunities Of Implementing Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR) With Underserved Populations In Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

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Access to care and treatment services for hepatitis C virus (HCV) remains a challenge, especially for underserved populations in Vietnam. These difficulties typically include access to health care services, HCV information, the cost of services, and other likely other context specific factors. Engagement with underserved populations who are at increased risk for HCV is crucial to fully understanding the barriers and supports.

We conducted a project using a community-based participatory research (CBPR) approach with underserved groups at risk for HCV in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC), Vietnam to explore care-seeking experiences and barriers to testing, care, and treatment. Together with community stakeholders, we formed three CBPR groups, including one group with men who have sex with men and transgender people, a second group with people who inject drugs, and the third group with those who have limited financial resources.

The majority of members actively participated in CBPR activities to identify the barriers and priorities related to accessing HCV care and treatment. The groups encountered numerous obstacles while implementing CBPR as it was a new approach. Moreover, this was the first time they self-identified and analyzed community problems, designed research tools, conducted data collection and analysis, and then developed community intervention activities. In addition, COVID-19 had significant impacts on the implementation of CBPR, including limited participation in meetings, physical and mental health issues, and lack of access to methadone and ARV. In spite of these obstacles, members of the group continued to employ CBPR strategies to adapt to the challenging situations, including the use of online platforms for communication and research, and the provision of urgent support such as food, medications, and well-being advice for members with COVID-19. The members of the group were motivated to apply the CBPR methodologies to other issues they were facing.

In sum, conducting CBPR with communities is an effective approach to understand the context specific issues and develop locally driven solutions. Group members were engaged and empowered to conduct CBPR to identify healthcare issues in their communities and implement solutions independently.