Reviewer's report

Title: The need to promote behaviour change at the cultural level: one factor explaining the limited impact of the MEMA kwa Vijana adolescent sexual health intervention in rural Tanzania. A process evaluation.

Version: 4 Date: 13 June 2012

Reviewer: Oonagh O'Brien

Reviewer's report:

This is an extremely interesting and informative paper. It contains information about HIV prevention as well as discussing the value of the theoretical perspectives which informed the intervention and lastly appraises the process of evaluating the research itself. As such it is a multi layered paper which does not shy away from the complexity of the issues discussed. It will be an important contribution to recent debates on HIV prevention which have drawn attention to complexity. At a time when a great deal of emphasis is put on the need for clear outcomes, this paper demonstrates that such outcomes must not be simplistic and are not easy to obtain. One section is quite dense and could be hard to follow, which could be clarified slightly- I draw attention to it in my comments below. Apart from that the only area that the authors might like to consider giving some attention to is the concept and discussion of the term ‘structural’, It is not discussed in much depth and appears to be slightly out of synch with other current writings. There are no major comulsory revisions but some discrtionary revisions which are listed in this report.

1. In the abstract it is stated that the result are that there are four interrelated socio- structural factors which act as barriers- these are then listed. However, these are not stated so clearly in the main results section of the paper (for example section on socio cultural barriers to HIV prevention). These could perhaps be made more consistent.

2. The structure of the paper is set out presenting firstly the barriers and then the facilitators for behavior change. It might be helpful for the reader if this structure is stated in the opening section of the paper, probably in para 4 of background.

3. The central purpose of the article is clearly stated in the opening section (background Para 4). Rather than a research question, this article discusses a research process.

4. The methods are well described and as the intervention was large and both the intervention and evaluation spread over a number of years, there is a lot to fit in here. The different approaches are clear and references are made to other publications covering this piece of research. The data is written up in a very interesting and nuanced way. Qualitative research requires attention to detail with examples from individuals and communities as well as links with broader
issues and the writing here conveys both of these. Some of the more complex sets of issues are written about in a very engaging way, for example the contradictions regarding norms and expectations of sexual behavior. The detailed ethnographic observation is able to demonstrate how these contradictions play out within families and communities- an important addition to knowledge in the field.

5. The article does not discuss data reporting and data deposition as the data has already been processed and written up elsewhere- references are made to these articles. Presumably these issues are discussed in these articles- I did not check. The way in which the ethnographic and process evaluation is written up is respectful of the confidentiality of individuals and communities. Attention is drawn to the sensitive nature of the research topic.

6. The discussions and conclusions are very thought provoking. Many researchers in the field of HIV are critical of individual behavior change theories and in this article there is some clear data about why they do not work on their own and why it is necessary to contextualize them within broader frameworks of understanding. The discussion is balanced and offers clear evidence to back up statements. In addition the authors do not dismiss these set of theories completely as some other writers have done, but look at which aspects might be useful in combinations with broader approaches. Throughout there is a welcome sense of the importance of getting this ‘right’ because of the gravity of the HIV epidemic and the large sums of money spent on interventions such as the one evaluated in this research. Limitations are implicitly addressed throughout the paper which in no way claims to be a final word on the debate but rather a contribution to a field where everyone is struggling with these issues.

7. A strength of the paper is the wide range of references which are used, the useful links to previous publications on the same research, and the multi disciplinary approach. In particular some of the anthropological insights are very strong and welcome in a field where culture is often used in very simplistic and deterministic ways. The tile is appropriate but does not necessarily convey the richness of the debate contained in the paper. Possibly a title with more focus on the theoretical debates might indicate this. But then that would be my personal interest!

8. The abstract conveys the content but is lacking in a statement about the main research question or purpose of the paper which I think would be useful and could possibly be added in.

9. The writing is clear and the article well structured. In the section on Discussion, theoretical implications the first part was particularly dense and might be clarified/restructured a little in order to assist the reader, particularly the end of paragraph one, and throughout both paragraph the use of the term constructs which are not used very clearly.

Throughout the use of the word ‘structural’ is rather loose. There is no discussion of the way it is being used in current writings on HIV – a few lines with some
discussion of the work of other writers on this might help e.g. Gupta, Coates, Rhodes might ensure a more robust use of the term.

**Level of interest:** An article of importance in its field

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**Statistical review:** No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.