Reviewer's report

Title: Lost opportunities in HIV prevention: programmes miss places where exposures are highest

Version: 1 Date: 29 October 2007

Reviewer: Anne Buve

Reviewer's report:

General
This is a nice paper describing the PLACE method in two cities in Zambia and exploring its potential usefulness.

-----------------------------------------------

Major Compulsory Revisions (that the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)

In the introduction section only studies from South East Asia and Latin America are cited to make the point that interventions targeting sex workers can be effective. There are several - though probably less spectacular - examples from sub-Saharan Africa (e.g. Kinshasa, Abidjan, Welkom in South Africa, Cotonou in Benin). I feel it would be more appropriate to cite those experiences and studies as sex work in Africa and in South East Asia are organised in a completely different way (in sub-Saharan Africa most sex work is NOT brothel based, while in SE Asia it is mostly brothel based). Also a thorough reading of these experiences should highlight the potential effects of sex worker interventions and put the PLACE method more in context (as an addition for instance to dedicated clinics for sex workers).

There are a number of paragraphs in the methods section that require further clarification:
1. What were the criteria for selecting the compounds in Livingstone?
2. What exactly is meant by "observed higher levels of poverty"? What criteria were used?
3. The authors used a very high number of informants. Was this really necessary? Why such high numbers? How were they selected?
4. It would be useful to get an idea of the total number of people living in Chelstone and the compounds in Livingstone.

Could the authors be more explicit in their comparison of the men and women that were found in the sites and the men and women in the "general population" (the data are there for Chelstone).

There are two items in the discussion section that bother me a bit:
1. The link is made between poverty and sherbeens and HIV. But we do not get to know how poverty is assessed. Moreover Livingstone is a quite different town from Lusaka and I feel it can not be excluded that the sherbeens just reflect a different "drinking culture" rather than differences in poverty levels.

2. In Zambia the role of sex work in the spread of HIV - not to speak about the needs of sex workers for special services - have been largely ignored. I feel the point should be made that so far there have not been serious attempts at interventions targeting sex workers in Zambia - apart from the Borders project. I feel there is still a place in Zambia for interventions targeting sex workers, such as dedicated clinics with outreach activities, and the PLACE method can be a useful addition to such interventions. But first the political will needs to be there to address this problem!

-------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)

Table 1 is difficult to read and should be "re-designed". Also, it would be useful to get an idea about the average number of people patronising the sites.

-------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

**What next?:** Unable to decide on acceptance or rejection until the authors have responded to the major compulsory revisions

**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.

**Declaration of competing interests:**

'I declare that I have no competing interests'