Author's response to reviews

Title: Community resistance to a peer education programme in Zimbabwe

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Author's response to reviews: see over
Please state specifically in the manuscript that informed consent was obtained from the participants of the study.

We now state: “Informed and written consent was obtained from all participants with the agreement that their confidentiality would be ensured.” (p.9)

Prior ethical approval was obtained from the Research Council of Zimbabwe – Number 02187 – the Applied and Quality Research Ethics Committee in Oxford, United Kingdom – N97.039 – and UNAIDS Research Ethics Committee – ERC 98/03.

This table contains information that could potentially identify individuals including their role, sex and location. Please indicate in the 'Methods' section of the manuscript that the participants of the study provided their consent to publish this information or summarize the data in such a way as to prevent identification or remove the table completely.

We have removed the location identifiers, making it impossible to identify the informants.

In general, I would like to see more information on the actual peer education programme, such as:

i) what are the specific objectives of this component?
ii) What activities were undertaken?
iii) What did the 63,000 PE meetings talk about exactly?
iv) How was 'promoting safer sexual behaviour' defined?

Referee 1 is interested in more information about the peer education programme. This stands in contrast to referee 2 who suggests that one way to shorten the paper is to cut down on this detail. We have tried to follow up on Referee 1, and will try and shorten the paper in another way.

We now state the specific objectives of the peer education programme: “The specific objectives of the peer education component were to i) recruit, train and motivate peer educators to reach the wider community and sexually vulnerable groups; ii) develop an outreach programme among CSWs and clients; iii) develop single women’s associations and networks.” (p.6).

Activities include/meetings covered “a schedule with a variety of activities such as brief presentations about HIV, discussions, drama, role plays and videos on safe sexual behaviour, condom demonstrations and quizzes.” (p.6-7)

We have defined safer sexual behavior as “later sexual debut, fewer non-regular partnerships in the past month, and less unprotected sex with...”
regular and casual partners in the past three years.” (p.6).

p. 6, line 1999: add sample size

Given the length of the paper we believe it should be enough to say that the intervention was evaluated through a community-randomized controlled trial of its impact on HIV incidence and sexual risk behaviour (N=5,228), and make reference the publication that gives detail to this.

p.7, line 212 and line 219: how would you explain the contradiction that condoms were less used in casual sex, and more accepted within marriage?

We are not quite presenting it like that. One question relates to reports of unprotected sex. The other question relates to women’s agreement with a statement. These are not necessarily correlated. It could potentially hint to a contradiction, but we would prefer to not speculate on this.

p. 8, line 247: where these staff members of local clinics part of the intervention?

Yes. We now state: “five staff members from local clinics in the intervention communities that offered improved STI and HIV services” (p.8)

Table: please revise the heading (transcript details), and remove the codes of the project implementers

We have replace ‘transcript details’ with ‘informant type’. We have also removed the codes of the project implementers.

Add timing of the interviews: in which year were they conducted? It seems this was long after the end of the intervention (in 2003)

We have especificed the year: ” In 2005 Wwe spoke to 81 people” (p.8)

p. 10, line 310: drop last sentence from the citation, it does not add anything and is not very clear.

The sentence has been removed.

in general, even though I think this publication is crucial, I also leaves me with the feeling that it does not add much new. We already know that there is a problem with PE if peer educators are not well supported, we know that local context needs to be taken into account, and that social realities can hinder safe sexual behaviours. I would find it an added value if the discussion could also touch upon the issue of how the programme dealt with these constatations (was there any monitoring?).

We have tied this comment with the recommendation to refer back to the theoretical approach of the paper (realist evaluation) and have included a paragraph in the discussion:

“Reflecting the theoretical approach to ‘realistic evaluation’, our analysis pointed to a web of inter-related factors that, in the view of community members, served as obstacles to the success of the programme. This not only underscores the importance of supplementing effectiveness evaluations with qualitative process evaluations in order to contextualise the outcomes and impacts observed, but also makes the case for conducting in-depth process evaluations throughout the project cycle (and not merely at the end of the project). Arguably, had a process evaluation of this kind been conducted earlier on in the project cycle, some of these challenges could have been identified, and changes made to the programme.” (p.22)
I would also suggest to put a recommendation in the text that effectiveness evaluations should have at least marginally address implementation issues in order to be able to interpret the data correctly. In the conclusion we have added: “In so doing, the paper highlights the importance of supplementing effectiveness evaluations with qualitative process evaluations in order to contextualise the outcomes and impacts observed.” (p.23)

<table>
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<th>Referee 2</th>
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<td>Given the depth of the results presented and the main conclusions, the manuscript is very lengthy (and too long). We identify a substantial potential for shortening the manuscript for example in the sections “the mainland STI/HIV intervention”, “Disappointing findings of the Mainland STI/HIV intervention” as well as the result section. The two introductory sections which amount to 2 pages can be cut down to 1 or 2 paragraphs. In the result section there is potential to drop a number of citations so that the section is reduced by at least 1/3 of the length. We have tried to reduce the length of the paper.</td>
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<td>Along the previous comment: in the introduction section there is a chapter on “rethinking evaluation research”. This paragraph is of interest. But in case ideas expressed in this paragraph are not revisited in the conclusion chapter and related to the findings of the research, this section can substantially be cut as not immediately relevant for the manuscript. We have tried to more explicitly link the theoretical approach to ‘realistic evaluation’ to the discussion. We have included the following paragraph: “Reflecting the theoretical approach to ‘realistic evaluation’, our analysis pointed to a web of inter-related factors that, in the view of community members, served as obstacles to the success of the programme. This not only underscores the importance of supplementing effectiveness evaluations with qualitative process evaluations in order to contextualise the outcomes and impacts observed, but also makes the case for conducting in-depth process evaluations throughout the project cycle (and not merely at the end of the project). Arguably, had a process evaluation of this kind been conducted earlier on in the project cycle, some of these challenges could have been identified, and changes made to the programme.” (p.22)</td>
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<td>In case for data analysis a software was used please add this in the methods section Software was not used and has therefore not been mentioned.</td>
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<td>Given the central role of peer educators within the context under review, please add a short paragraph describing their general characteristics (e.g. still active CSWs? Older aged women, etc.) We have added detail to the paragraph about the peer educators. It now says: “The peer educators were selected from local single women (mainly divorced, separated or widowed), most of whom were CSWs (with a mix of past or active CSWs) given lack of other economic opportunities for women, representing all age groups” (p.6)</td>
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