

P4.13. Unless We Small People Do Something:” HIV and the Transition from Youth Volunteers to Activists in Swaziland - Sara Wood, University of Washington, USA
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Background/Significance: A trend in coping with increasing rates of HIV infection in Africa is to use young people as volunteer peer educators in HIV-prevention activities. This qualitative study looks at varying perspectives of the youth volunteer phenomenon in Swaziland, a country with the highest HIV prevalence in the world and the last reigning monarchy in Africa, where implications of unpaid service at a minimum show a clash between cultural traditions and the expectations of organizations on young community members who act as unpaid helpers. This study includes a compelling participatory action component using youth photography. In the face of the AIDS epidemic, youth photographs highlight the struggle to transition into adulthood via volunteerism, where a combination of factors is spurring some to emerge as activists.

Swaziland is the world’s leader in HIV prevalence at nearly 42 % coupled with the lowest life expectancy in the world at approximately 32 years (CIA, 2006). At the cusp of this age are young people between the ages of 25-29, who have the highest percentage of HIV infections in the country at 56 %, followed by those aged 20-24, who have a reported prevalence of 46.3 % (UNAIDS, 2005 and USAID, 2005 and NERCHA in *Times of Swaziland*, 2005). With an influx in donor aid, organizations are appealing to youth volunteers who provide a range of unpaid services in Swaziland including peer education, home-based care, counseling, and treatment literacy about anti-retroviral (ARV) medication. Many youth volunteers in Swaziland are out of school, unemployed and in their mid 20s to early 30s. The issue of their specific age has manifold implications as those in this age bracket straddle multiple realities. Research has repeatedly pointed to structural constraints on youth in southern Africa that impact their power to fully participate, both at grassroots and policy levels.

Main Question/Hypothesis: This qualitative study looks at youth who volunteer in Swaziland and the sustainability issues of young people working for free within modern-day Swaziland, asking whether or not the influx of donor aid and the government cry for youth leadership and participation are in fact helping young people in the way intended. The research aimed to identify characteristics of youth who volunteer in HIV and AIDS prevention; to identify program goals of organizations working with youth in HIV and AIDS prevention and compare them with youth perceptions of whether such goals are being met; and to identify sustainability needs of both youth and organizations working with youth in HIV and AIDS prevention.

Methodology: Individual interviews, focus groups and direct observation were conducted throughout Swaziland between October-December 2005 with youth volunteers between the ages of 18-32, as well as staff and funders from HIV and AIDS organizations who work with youth. Some youth participants were also purposively recruited to use Photovoice, a participatory action research (PAR) methodology. Participants were from faith-based (FBO), community based (CBO) and national non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The study included 43 participants, 33 of whom were youth.

Findings: The following themes emerged:

- agency definitions of “youth volunteers” include many people who are not young;
- the concept of volunteering is experiencing a cultural shift;
- while there are pros to volunteering, there are also numerous cons;
- there are predictable consequences for how volunteers are treated, with some youth volunteers moving from volunteerism to activism.

Several key results from the Photovoice methodology reveal the realities of youth volunteers in the face of poverty and HIV and also provide insight into Swaziland’s power structure with regard to youth activism.

Photographs depicted hardships faced by youth volunteers, including their poverty, their adult-like responsibilities, transport woes, and environmental degradation and drought – threats to their survival. Specific attention was placed on issues related to HIV and AIDS.

Knowledge Contribution: Trained, empowered and encouraged by HIV and AIDS agencies, youth are told, and believe, that their role in the future of their small country is paramount. Massive complexities face Swazi institutions that seek to help youth. NGO staff and funding agencies and youth themselves are fatigued and frustrated by logistical intricacies, such as lack of program coordination on a national level, misinformation about funding and a perceived lack of commitment from the government.

During this study, when youth participants engaged in activism through their photography to advocate on behalf of HIV+ persons during a national ARV shortage, they were threatened by powerful national and local funders. The Photovoice project illustrated a compelling new way to view the distressing disparities in Swaziland and demonstrated the force of youth's ability to mobilize change. This study's FBO could serve as one positive and replicable model as could foreign models that provide ongoing mentorship/training and basic provisions to volunteers, as well as savings toward their education with the support of state funds. The voice of youth in this study resound about the big culprits – poverty, unemployment, health disparities and inequities, human rights – which ultimately need to be addressed on a policy level. If not, youth predict that their nation will be wiped away.

Question: *“Seriously, will we ever win the fight against HIV and AIDS?”*

Answer: *“Only after it has finished us.” (Youth, males, Focus Group Discussion, Community Based Organization).*