



INVESTING IN COMMUNITY SYSTEMS TO CHANGE THE TIDE: UNWAVERING COMMITMENT OF A CHAMPION IN BRIDGING THE GAP FOR GREATER SCALE AND IMPACT

Introduction

Shinyanga, one of Tanzania's 17 national regions, has been identified as a priority area for the VMMC (Voluntary Medical Male Circumcision) program. However, cultural resistance and prevailing misconceptions around circumcision has hindered its acceptance among the populace, particularly adolescent youth, and adult men. Afya *Plus* and Tanzania Health Promotion Support (THPS), have been instrumental in supporting the VMMC program as an HIV prevention strategy. This support is made possible through funding from PEPFAR/CDC through THPS led Afya Hatua project which supports comprehensive facility and community-based HIV prevention, care and treatment efforts) in the region.

In the second quarter, Afya *Plus* successfully executed an accelerated plan, orchestrating well-coordinated data-informed outreach VMMC services across Shinyanga. Through this initiative, **15,533 men** underwent circumcision from over **60 outreach sites**. This remarkable achievement showcased the program team's exceptional capacity, reaching **51%** of the annual target, equivalent to **46,689 circumcised men**.

One of the pivotal community-based interventions employed involves deploying community health workers (CHWs) to advocate for circumcision among men. Human-centric community efforts have proven to be critical in overcoming many major challenges and barriers in the HIV/AIDS response, including reaching people with HIV prevention services for epidemic control. CHWs have been forefront in bridging the gap, in improving access to integrated HIV

prevention services among underserved men through VMMC. CHWs have been playing a crucial role in identifying geographical settings with underserved men, informing service delivery activities, addressing barriers and demand creation needs, facilitate linkage to service delivery points and follow up for better outcomes. While the effectiveness of each CHW varies, Mzee Jonas Mpandagimoto has emerged as a standout figure in Manheigana village, Solwa Ward-Shinyanga DC. Born and raised in the same village over 55 years ago, Mzee Jonas Mpandagimoto is also serving as one of the village government leaders and chairs the social service committee.

Mzee Jonas Mpandagimoto's success can be attributed to his strong interpersonal skills empowered with human-centered design, friendly demeanor, and ability to connect with individuals from diverse backgrounds. With experience garnered from various past projects including HTS (HIV Testing Services), PMTCT (Prevention of Mother-to-Child Transmission), FP (Family Planning), Immunization, and VMMC, Mzee Jonas Mpandagimoto is recognized as a champion of health promotion and community mobilization.

In just 18 days, Mzee Jonas Mpandagimoto successfully recruited **over 420 men** and connected them to VMMC service delivery points, a significant portion of whom were above 20 years old. Utilizing diverse methods such as one-on-one interpersonal communication, house-to-house visits and collaboration with Sungusungu community networks, Mzee Jonas Mpandagimoto effectively communicates the importance of VMMC and HIV prevention to large groups of men in the community. He further facilitates appointments for men willing to undergo circumcision, resulting in a substantial influx of men demand for service at the VMMC service delivery points.



Moreover, Mzee Jonas Mpandagimoto dedicates considerable time to engage with men who have undergone circumcision, encouraging them to advocate for the service to other uncircumcised men. For instance, each circumcised man was encouraged to bring at least five uncircumcised men for the service, thereby perpetuating a cycle of community involvement, awareness and influence on health seeking behaviors especially among men. Mzee Jonas Mpandagimoto's unwavering dedication and strategic approach have significantly contributed to the success of the VMMC program in Shinyanga.

The success story of the VMMC program in Shinyanga stands as a testament to the power of the community mobilization and effective community-led leadership in overcoming cultural barriers in accessing health services while promoting positive health seeking behaviors especially among men. Through the dedicated efforts of individuals like Mzee Jonas Mpandagimoto, engagement of the local communities, community-based structures and stakeholders, significant strides have been made in increasing acceptance and uptake of integrated HIV prevention services through VMMC as an essential HIV prevention strategy for achieving the epidemic control.

By addressing social and behavioral factors head-on and implementing innovative data-informed outreach initiatives, the program has achieved remarkable results, reached thousands of men, and contributed to the overall goal of reducing the transmission of HIV/AIDS in the region. As we celebrate these achievements, it is crucial to continue fostering community engagement, building upon the momentum generated, and expanding access to essential healthcare services for all individuals in need and be on track to end HIV/AIDS by 2030. With continued dedication and collaboration from integrated and well-coordinated CHWs program, we can strive towards a healthier, more resilient future for our communities.

Conclusion:

The success of the VMMC program in Shinyanga exemplifies the transformative impact of community mobilization and effectiveness of community-led leadership in surmounting cultural barriers to healthcare access. Through the dedication of individuals like Mzee Jonas Mpandagimoto and the collaborative efforts of local communities and stakeholders, significant progress has been achieved in promoting positive health-seeking behaviors, particularly among men. By addressing social and behavioral factors and implementing innovative data-driven outreach initiatives, the program has not only reached thousands of men but has also contributed substantially to reducing the transmission of HIV/AIDS in the region. As we commemorate these achievements, it is imperative to sustain the momentum generated, foster continued community engagement, and expand universal access to essential healthcare services. By remaining steadfast in our commitment and fostering collaboration, we can move closer to our goal of ending HIV/AIDS by 2030, ensuring a healthier, more resilient future for Tanzanian's communities.

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goal of HIV prevention and healthcare access. Additionally, we appreciate the collaboration and commitment of local communities, community-based structures, and stakeholders whose partnership has been pivotal in achieving our objectives.

Disclaimer:

While every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy and reliability of the information presented in this documentation, it is important to note that the success of the VMMC program in Shinyanga is a culmination of multifaceted efforts involving various stakeholders and factors. The achievements highlighted herein are specific to the context of Shinyanga and may not necessarily be replicated in other settings without due consideration of local dynamics and challenges. Moreover, individual experiences and outcomes may vary, and the effectiveness of interventions such as community mobilization and outreach initiatives may be influenced by numerous contextual factors. Therefore, readers are encouraged to exercise discretion and seek additional information as deemed necessary.