



Activity Report: HIV Survey

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Introduction

In the original proposal we submitted during the selection process for the PO volunteer placement, one of the activities proposed was a HIV Awareness Campaign. The original idea was to create a grassroots campaign educating a core group of kids and then encouraging them to disseminate the information amongst their own community through word of mouth, pamphlets and theatre, with the project providing the resources to do so.

After several months on the island itself, we decide to put a HIV campaign into action, but one slightly different to what we had planned. As there was already a HIV awareness group on the island, we thought we would invite that group to do a presentation at our project, and then - using our freshly informed project members - do a survey of the islands residents regarding their knowledge of HIV/AIDS and sexual habits. We would then collate the data together with the project guys, and demonstrate to them how to analyze data and create graphs with Microsoft Excel. Finally, we would use the statistics as the basis for an article in another of our initiatives, the project newspaper.

Preparation

I had a couple of meetings with Doctors of the World, the organization behind the HIV activist team. They agreed to organize a presentation with theatre and a question-and-answer session. They also committed to reviewing our draft HIV survey and to provide condoms to distribute with the next edition of the newspaper. In exchange we agreed to lend a HIV information CD to them, which we had received the previous month, and to provide them with the statistics that we would collate in the forthcoming survey.

For the survey itself I searched online for similar examples of HIV inquiries in third-world contexts. I created a survey that was small enough to fit on a single sheet (allowing us to print more copies), and yet addressed both knowledge and habits. I passed the copy onto the Doctors of the World for feedback.

Presentation

The Doctors of the World performance went fairly well. Our only responsibility was to provide the space and the students. In my experiences so far on the island, I had learnt that just publicizing an event was not enough to bring people in. It didn't matter how many times someone promised you they were coming, they probably weren't going to show. So this time, I added one more step to the "publicity" process: about fifteen minutes before we were due to commence, I sprinted madly around the island announcing the event, gathering up a trailing crowd of young people and luring them to the project like some kind of African pied piper.

With the project packed, the presentation began, with the activists (all local kids between the ages of 13-16) performing some excellent theatre and really revving up the crowd. Between each mini-performance, the man responsible for the theatre group (a local official who I hadn't yet met) coordinated some discussions about the virus. It all went very well, and I was feeling quite happy about things until he asked who had written up the survey. I put my hand up, anticipating lavish praise for coming up with such a wonderful document. On the contrary, what followed was a comprehensive dressing down for writing up such a load of rubbish.

He kindly let me know, in front of a room full of my students, that I clearly had no idea of the difference between HIV and AIDS (as there was no question about what the difference was in the survey). He also told me that it was stupid to ask people about their sexual habits (HIV positive or negative, number of partners, use of condoms etc) as respondents would probably lie. He also disliked how rather than making it multiple choice, I had left the questions as open responses. After all this, he presented an alternative survey.

I debated with myself whether to argue the issue with him, but decided it would be best to humbly accept the critique of a man probably infinitely more qualified than I. Forcing a smile, I went to the front and thanked him for the wonderful show and helpful feedback. I even followed through with my original plan to offer to take him to lunch, but I think he could see the murderous look in my eyes and turned it down.

So after giving myself a few moments to get over my hurt ego, I set down to read his alternative vision of a HIV survey. I have to admit, I was quite delighted to find that it was rambling, incoherent, full of spelling mistakes, and about six pages long. It focused heavily on the issue of the difference between HIV and AIDS, whereas I was more interested in public beliefs about prevention and treatment. Finally, his multiple choice responses only offered strictly scientific options, which ignored that a significant proportion of the population had quite superstitious attitudes toward disease.

After fantasizing for a bit about belittling his work in public, I shook myself out of it and looked at what ideas I could salvage from the wreckage of our two flawed questionnaires. He was quite right in saying that people would probably lie about their sexual habits, but I still felt it was worth including, if only to get a hint of what the reality was like. Likewise, it was true that people often needed to be prompted for an answer by a multiple-choice format, which as an added benefit would make the data much easier to process.

So I set about revising the survey. To decide on multiple choice options appropriate to the island, I asked some of the project guys what common beliefs about HIV were. I included most of these, and just in case we missed anything major, every question had an "other" space for people to write their own response. Also, I begrudgingly included a question on the difference between HIV and AIDS.

Conducting the survey

Over a couple of weeks we hit the streets with the questionnaires. With it being December and school holidays, most the project guys had plenty of time on their hands, so were quite happy to help out. Tino, Shany, Samito, Zito, Mingiunho and Firoso all volunteered their time, and even Wilbert chipped in with his cousin Sebastian and former project professor Miguel when they arrived at the end of December. The member who clocked up the most hours in the street however was Jaime, who was a part of almost every survey team that went out. Coman was too busy with work to assist, Rauf wasn't interested, and Gito promised repeatedly to show up but never came through.

We were doing the survey during the hottest month of the year, so the guys were always provided plenty of water when they were out in the field, and we generally set out either early in the morning or late afternoon. Working in teams of two, we would work through the island one neighborhood at a time, surveying anybody above the age of 13.

I was expecting that each person could do about twenty surveys per day, however we found that it was quite difficult to find respondents, and once found they would often take a long time to read and complete the document, requiring a lot of assistance. So in the end we managed about 10-15 surveys per day per team of two.

A major problem was the issue of confidentiality, with the concept of privacy not really existing in the jam-packed slums of macuti town. Whenever someone started a survey, a swarm of people would try and peek at what was being written, and if we went with the respondent inside their house there would be about ten nosey family members buzzing around. The problem was particularly serious with illiterate respondents as everything had to be done verbally. Clearly, somebody isn't about to admit out loud that they had ten sexual partners a year in front of their wife.

It didn't matter how many times people were told to stop reading someone else's responses, they tended to just carry on with it. In the end, the only option was to block their line of sight, or in the case of a verbal interview forcibly drag the spectators away!

Another problem was of language. I was weak in Portuguese, and as it turns out, so was much of the island, where Macua is really most people's primary form of communication. A written form of Macua exists, but hardly anybody knows how to read it, including the project guys, so a verbal translation of written Portuguese on the spot was our only option. Of those who could read Portuguese themselves, the ability was often quite limited, no doubt resulting in many misinterpretations of the questions.

The final issue we had was of the survey method and type of respondents. On the advice of Doctors of The World, we were to survey using the "snowball method", which involved asking the first respondent to take us to a friend or family member, and that person taking us to another and so on. However, as we worked in two separate teams per day, there was always a team I was not present with. I found this team always completely ignored the instructions and just surveyed their own friends and family. This meant that not only the methodology was completely unscientific, but that we were getting far too many respondents from the neighborhoods the project guys lived in, and far too many of their age group.

After noticing this, we started specifically targeting the demographics the survey was short in, which were the poorer neighborhoods, older people and women. In the end, I think we got a fairly balanced sample of the island population, accounting for the fact that with the life expectancy here being below 40, it is a very young place.

Processing the data

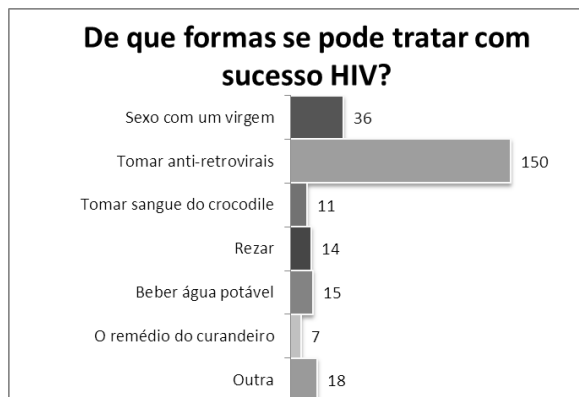
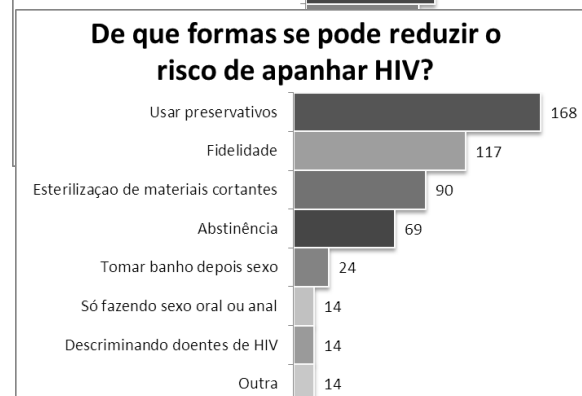
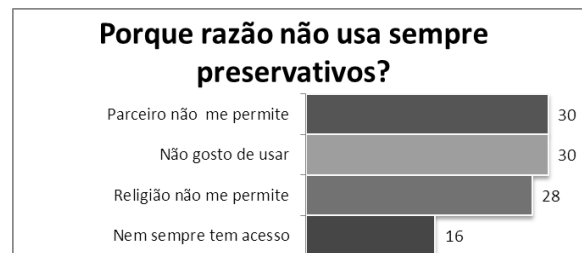
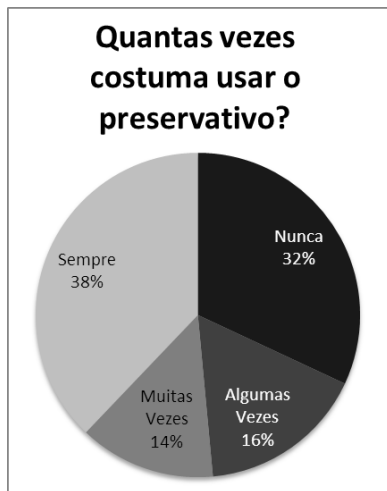
When we reached the halfway point of surveys completed in the field, I started inputting the data into the computer, using a binary system suggested by Margarida, who studied statistics at university. In Excel we created a column for every multiple choice option possible and if the respondent selected the option we would put a one, and if the respondent didn't it would receive a 0. If the question was skipped altogether, all options would be marked by a 'n'. For yes and no questions, a column would exist for yes and a column for no, with the same system. For questions asking for a number, columns each representing a different range of numbers would be offered.

This system allowed us to process questions that could potentially have more than one response, for example "how can you reduce the risk of catching HIV?" has several correct answers, such as using condoms and remaining faithful to your partner.

I personally inputted most the data, but left 20 to do with the project guys in a small data processing session. Wilbert was on the island for this, and beforehand showed myself and Margarida a trick or two with Excel to make the data easier to organize. The session itself involved explaining the data input process to the team, and having every member input at least one questionnaire.

The next week we did a demonstration of how to create graphs in Excel using the raw data, and also explained what type of graphs to use with what type of data (for example pie charts for percentages and bar graphs for questions where respondents could have selected more than one response).

Some examples of graphs produced from the data.



The article

Looking at the data itself, from a journalist’s perspective there was one big story to be told. People had a relatively good grasp of how to catch, prevent and treat HIV. Behavior, however, did not reflect this, with people reporting an average of 2.5 sexual partners a year, a figure that jumps to 3.44 per year for male respondents. Only 38% of respondents claimed that they “always” use condoms and 32% reported that they “never” use them. Compounding all this was the likelihood that people under-exaggerated the number of sexual partners, and over-exaggerated condom use.

The main two reasons stated for not using condoms was that “my religion does not permit me” (a response equally prevalent amongst Muslims and Christians), and that “my partner does not permit me”. It is worth bearing in mind that although both these elements are very real, they are also the two options that remove personal culpability in the decision.

So the story we ran was based around this idea, that generally people knew how to prevent HIV, they just weren’t doing it. We used some of the graphs shown to the right, and also included a “true or false” section addressing some of the more common misconceptions, such as whether having sex with a virgin was a potential cure.

With the distribution of the journal, we wanted to include a pack of condoms with every edition. Unfortunately, the box Doctors of the World provided us ran out quite quickly, so it seemed we would

not have enough. I happened to mention this to a Hungarian man I had struck up conversation with in a bar, and it turned out he was the coordinator of Humana's northern Mozambique HIV campaign. He offered to provide some more condoms, and the next day showed up with a gigantic box with literally thousands more than we needed!

So we included four condoms with every paper, and distributed 250 copies. Many respondents had specifically asked to receive a copy, so we did our best to make sure they received one. Being the second edition of Voz Jovem, we were keen to find out if there was still an appetite for this sort of information, and the answer was a resounding yes, with the copies snapped up almost immediately.

For the future

With our vast new reserves of condoms, we can now have a bowl of them available at all times. Likewise, they can be used for future campaigns, in tandem with a HIV information CD donated to us (filled with pamphlet templates and such). I would suggest an information campaign targeting the issues people struggled the most with in the least informed areas on the island (which can be deduced from our statistics). There is still enough information left to do a second article in the journal, perhaps focusing on the results we collated relating to how HIV is spread.

The data will be given to Doctors of the World, as agreed, and hopefully they make good use of it as well.