

STAR-EC Technical Brief

PROMOTING CONDOM USE FOR HIV PREVENTION

in East Central Uganda

Background

When used correctly, condoms are highly effective in preventing HIV. Widespread adoption of the consistent and correct use of condoms is critical to reducing the prevalence of HIV, and condom promotion is a central component of comprehensive, effective, and sustainable HIV prevention programming.

In Uganda, where the national HIV prevalence among people aged 15-49 is roughly 7.1 percent¹, the government promotes condom use through the National Coordination Committee of the Ministry of Health (MOH). The committee draws membership from the MOH, National Drug Authority (NDA), National Medical Stores (NMS), other development partners (e.g. PEP-FAR, UN), and representatives from donor-funded health projects. The committee establishes standards, quality assurance, forecasting, and policy pertaining to condoms and developed the National Condom Programming Strategy (2013-2015), which guides national condom promotion activities in concert with the National HIV Prevention Strategy (2011-2015) and the Health Sector Strategic & Investment Plan (2010/11-2014/15).

The National Condom Programming Strategy estimates that 240 million condoms are needed annually to ensure protection against sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV, for all sexually active Ugandans. Distributing these condoms, especially in hard-to-reach communities, presents logistical challenges. Furthermore, ensuring that condoms are used during every risky sexual encounter requires a widespread change in peoples' attitudes and behaviors related to condom use.

A VHT leads a condom information session for a group of boda boda drivers in Bugiri District

Interventions

Launched in 2009, STAR-EC has supported district health teams (DHTs) and civil society organizations (CSOs) to increase the availability, accessibility, and acceptability—the '3As'—of both male and female condoms in the region's nine districts. After more than seven years of implementation, STAR-EC has supported the distribution of nearly 15 million condoms. The project has targeted the region's high-risk populations, which include sex workers, truckers, fisher folk, boda boda drivers, and people who engage in transactional sex.

STAR-EC used peer education, social marketing, and educational performances to increase awareness of and demand for male and female condoms. These activities worked in concert, playing unique roles with comparative advantages and complementary benefits to ensure the '3As' of condom promotion are achieved in East Central Uganda.



The program worked with public and private sector partners to ensure that condoms were available throughout the region. Condoms were received from two major sources: NMS, which procures and provides essential medical commodities to health centers throughout Uganda, and a buffering system that is sponsored and supported by PEPFAR, USAID, UNFPA, the MOH, and donor-funded health projects, including STAR-EC. The buffering system is in place to ensure an uninterrupted supply of male and female condoms in the event that the NMS experiences a stock out.

Ensuring communities have access to condoms

To improve community access to condoms, STAR-EC helped establish static and mobile condom outlets in communities. STAR-EC trained and coordinated teams of community health educators, which include Village Health Teams (VHTs), ‘expert clients’, and linkage facilitators to provide and promote condoms at health facilities, popular community locations (bars, video halls, food kiosks) and directly to community members.

STAR-EC identified and mapped out ‘hot spots,’ including busy truck stops, islands, landing sites and busy commercial centers. Within the ‘hot spots’, busy recreational facilities, lodges, ‘pork joints’, bars, and local video halls (known as bibandas) were selected and (male) condom dispensers were installed. The program also provided basic condom education to the managers of these establishments to help them rein-

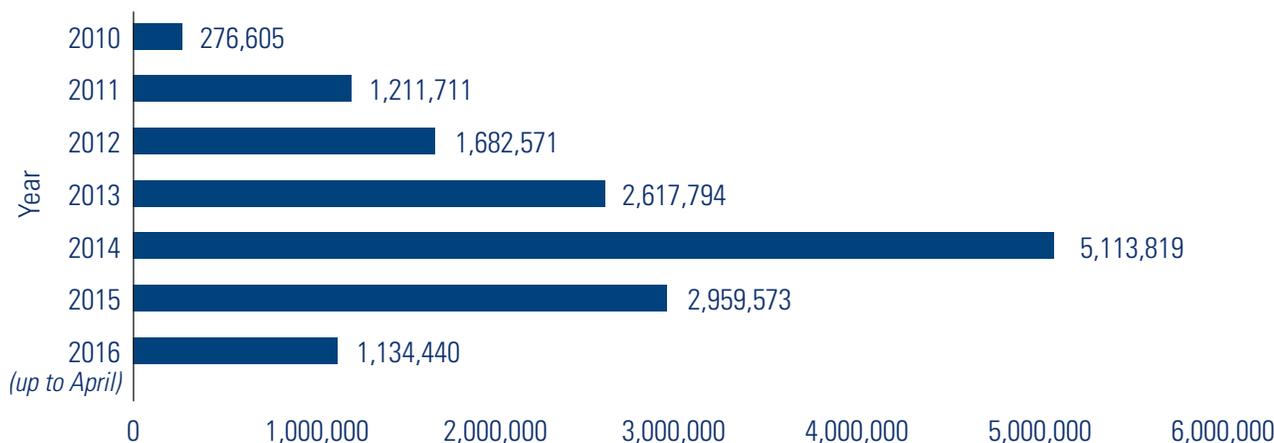
force safe-sex messaging to their patrons and to ensure their collaboration with VHTs in maintaining a continuous stock of condoms. VHTs resupplied each location and conferred with location managers, generated monthly stock status reports, and submitted the reports to STAR-EC. STAR-EC analyzed these data to gauge the number of condoms taken from the dispensers at the selected ‘hot spots’ and make decisions as to where to increase condom availability and condom awareness activities.

Increasing public awareness and knowledge of condoms

Starting in 2010, STAR-EC worked with the MOH to select and train 500 peer educators throughout the region to promote a range of HIV prevention strategies, including condom use, in their communities. The peer educators, males and females aged 15 and older, were selected from partnering CSOs based on their leadership qualities and ability to communicate in local languages.

The peer educators were divided into groups of 30 and attended a five-day training conducted by STAR-EC on basic HIV and TB prevention strategies, community mobilization, interpersonal communication skills, strategies for communication with local leaders, and how to engage youth and peers in fun, healthy activities. Once they were trained, peer educators were sent into communities—usually to the high-traffic ‘hot spots’ – where they initiated activities and discussions (both

Figure 1: Condoms distributed through STAR-EC support by project year



one-on-one and in small groups) focused on various health topics, including condom use. STAR-EC provided the peer educators with flip charts, leaflets, and props to help reinforce messaging. Peer educators also enlisted satisfied condom users to participate in these discussions, provide testimonies of their positive experiences, and answer questions.

STAR-EC enlisted and trained ‘mentor buddies’, members of targeted, high-risk populations, to educate and promote condom use among their peers. STAR-EC selected experienced female sex workers (FSWs) and *boda boda* drivers to help conduct discussion sessions with other sex workers and drivers, which lent credibility to pro-condom messaging, and provided a comfortable, judgment-free environment for people to ask questions about condom use and other HIV prevention topics.

STAR-EC distributed informational videos on HIV prevention strategies and condoms that were played at bibandas, guest houses, and lodges, where interpersonal communication and group discussions are not feasible. Bibanda managers and VHTs worked together to develop a regular viewing schedule to ensure that VHTs were there when the films were played to answer viewers’ questions.

STAR-EC organized performances and events in communities, including karaoke, musical performances, and puppet shows, at which pro-condom messaging and information about HIV prevention and treatment was offered. During these events, VHTs and peer educators led the audience in health-related question and answer sessions during breaks in the performances. They also distributed condoms and provided one-on-one counseling.

Partnership with social marketing and experiential teams

Early in the project, STAR-EC identified the need to provide a wide range of condom products and brands in order to create a more appealing market for various target populations. The project collaborated with Uganda Health Marketing Group (UHMG) on a social marketing initiative that promoted a range of branded condom products (including Protector and Condom

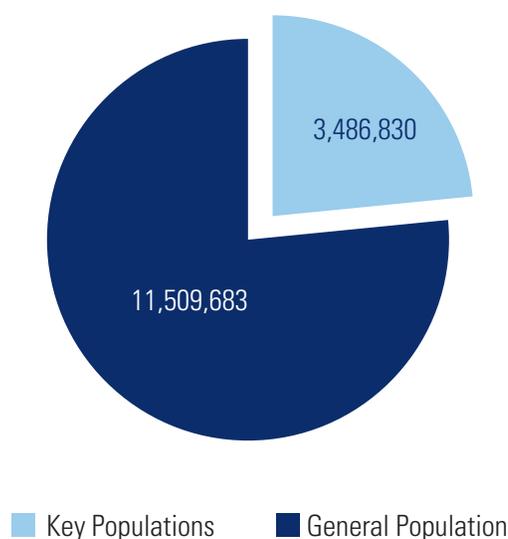
O), which were subsidized by STAR-EC and sold to the public at a reduced price. This social marketing model, which sold a variety of condoms rather than giving one or two brands away for free, created a selective consumer base that also supported the private sector.

Starting in 2014, STAR-EC adopted the OBULAMU (‘how is life?’) campaign, which is a national behavior change communication (BCC) platform developed by Communication for Healthy Communities (CHC)² and supported by the MOH and USAID. The campaign produced a wide range of media products, including billboards, posters, and radio announcements tailored to particular segments of the population. The ‘how’s your love life?’ section of the campaign was tailored to sexually active young adults (18 to 30 years old), and promoted condom use. STAR-EC displayed and distributed OBULAMU’s condom promotion materials at facilities, performances, and outreach events.

Results

As of March 2016, STAR-EC distributed nearly 15 million condoms (Figure 1). Approximately 30 percent of these condoms were distributed to high-risk populations (Figure 2). According to STAR-EC’s annual Lot Quality Assurance Sample

Figure 2: Proportion of condoms distributed to key populations in East Central Uganda (2010-2016)



(LQAS) survey, the percentage of respondents who knew where they could obtain condoms held steady at around 92 percent over the life of the project. However, the sources from which respondents knew they could obtain condoms changed; respondents who knew they could access condoms from a health facility increased from 85 percent (2009) to 95 percent (2015); those who knew they could obtain condoms from a VHT increased from 9 percent (2009) to 13 percent (2015); and those who named 'shops' as a place to obtain condoms decreased from 47 percent to 29 percent. This shift indicates an increase in awareness of services provided at health facilities and by VHTs.

Conclusion

Between 2009 and 2016, STAR-EC promoted a multi-dimensional approach to condom education and distribution that aimed at improving knowledge on correct and consistent use of condoms as part of HIV prevention interventions, particularly among most-at-risk populations.

Over the course of implementation, the project experienced several challenges. Occasional stock outs of condoms hindered effective condom promotion.

To address this issue, STAR-EC supported health facilities to properly quantify and include condoms as part of essential supplies. Due to the lack of a standardized tool to track distributed condoms, distribution of some condoms went unreported. The project overcame this issue by using different data sources to triangulate and track condoms that were distributed.

A lack of comprehensive knowledge about condom use and low risk perception about HIV persists among some high-risk populations, particularly fishermen. STAR-EC targeted these groups with increased informational sessions to help dispel misinformation about condoms and HIV and increase awareness about the effectiveness of condoms for the prevention of HIV and other STIs.

By sourcing products from the NMS, the cooperative buffering system, and private-sector manufacturers, STAR-EC was able to regularly and systematically distribute an increasing number of condoms to health facilities and in communities. By ensuring the availability of a variety of brands and types of condoms, STAR-EC helped create a dynamic marketplace, which helped drive demand for condoms.

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STAR-EC Headquarters

Plot 10 Kiira Lane, Mpumudde Division, P.O Box 829, Jinja
Tel: +256 434 120225, +256 434 120277, +256 332 260182, +256 332 260183
Fax: +256 434 120232 • www.starecuganda.jsi.com