



CARIBBEAN CIVIL SOCIETY SHOWCASE SERIES

Showcasing projects and programmes supported by the CVC/COIN Vulnerabilised Groups Project and aiming to strengthen rights-based responses to HIV in the populations most vulnerable to HIV

Piloting a Sexual Health Approach: A peer education intervention with young men who have sex with men (MSM)



Este Amor's Peer Educators are brave young men and transgender women between ages 16 and 19.
Photo: Fran Afonso

In the Dominican Republic, Este Amor piloted CVC/COIN's sexual health approach to peer education with young MSM. Founded in 2005 by four gay men, a nurse and social worker in response to concern that many MSM who accessed local health services came with already advanced stages of infection, Este Amor serves and represents MSM in the country's eastern region.



Este Amor's peer education supervisor.
Photo: Fran Afonso

CONTEXT

Very few adolescent males in San Medro de Macoris, in the Eastern province of the Dominican Republic, will admit to being gay or transgender, but a great many more engage in male-male sex, whether or not they also engage in male-female sex.

HIV prevalence in MSM is between 6 and 11 percent in the Dominican Republic. It is not clear how many young men who have sex with men are HIV positive, but according to peer educators who worked on this project, many young men become sexually active as soon as they reach adolescence and some even earlier.

In the Dominican Republic, boys who appear effeminate are isolated or bullied in schools, not only by their peers, but by their teachers, causing many to underachieve or drop out. Sexual and reproductive health, let alone discussions on diversity, is not included in the school curriculum. Few of the boys have learnt skills to protect themselves against the sexual exploitation, abuse, verbal and physical violence and robbery that is often inflicted on gay and transgender men by members of the general public and the police.

Poverty and employment discrimination also causes many young boys to engage in sex in exchange for gifts or money. Often clients are older men who

have sex with men, not tourists but Dominican men, who often have wives and girlfriends. Many employers share society's prejudices against gay and transgender men and will not give them jobs, even when they are old enough and qualified. This, coupled with high levels of unemployment in the eastern region, makes selling sex one of the few employment options for young effeminate gay men

PROJECT GOAL

Lower risk for HIV and STIs for young men who have sex with men between the ages 15 and 21.

PROJECT COMPONENTS

CVC/COIN's Sexual Health Training for 20 peer educators. Three 5-day trainings at three to four month intervals on sexual health and empowerment with a focus on understanding sexual orientation and gender identity and its impact on health.

Peer education with emphasis on sensitively and effectively reaching non-gay identifying or closeted MSM in ways in hostile environments that discriminate against people based on gender identity and expression.

INITIAL RESULTS

- 20 peer educators trained and 1 supervisor and 8 peer educators working in the field
- Over 2,500 adolescents and young people reached with sexual health education and many adults and parents
- Sensitization of staff in two health centers about the projects aims
- Nearly 14,000 condoms distributed

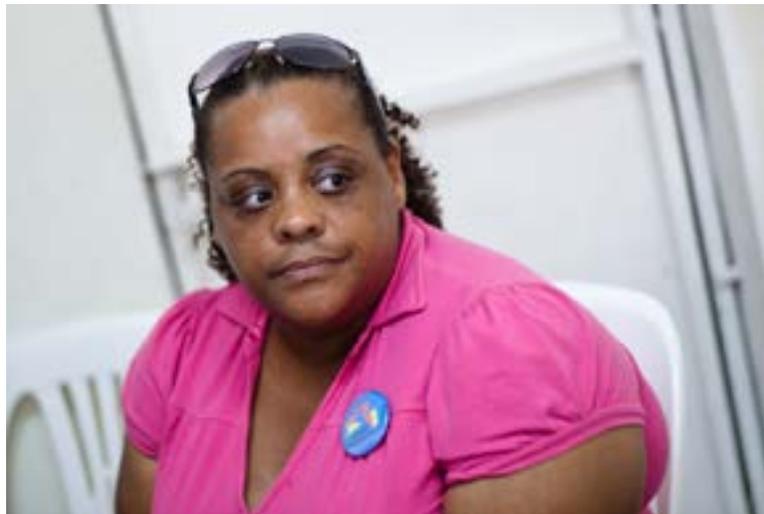
CHALLENGES

For small NGOs like Este Amor, based outside of Santo Domingo, maintaining a consistent source and supply of condoms is a challenge. As in other CVC/COIN financed model projects, Este Amor was unable to source and distribute free lubricants, an essential tool for safer sex between MSM.

Access to youth-friendly sexual reproductive health services remains a challenge all over the Dominican Republic, including in the eastern region. Este Amor did not keep track of how many people accessed HIV testing or other services as a result of the project and feel visits by a mobile clinic would significantly increased access of young people to services.

THE WAY AHEAD

Lack of sexual health education in schools is a major challenge for all Caribbean countries and a real reason for high levels of teenage pregnancy and STIs in young people. For gay adolescents and youth there is almost complete silence around sexual orientation and gender identity issues in their schools and homes. It is not uncommon for young Dominicans to be arrested because they look gay or transgender. Often police extort sexual favours or money from young people, and there are no obvious mechanisms that support young people to deal with these human rights violations. In the longer term, there is a need for Caribbean governments to include sexual health education (which includes discussions on sexual orientation, gender identity and expression) in the school curriculum, and to address bullying and violence of gender nonconforming youth in school. In the immediate future, Este Amor hopes to continue to develop its programme in the eastern region and to continue to train new youth peer educators in sexual health and increase youth access to sexual reproductive health services and care.



Marcia Alvarez, a social worker, coordinated this project. Photo: Fran Afonso

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This series describes projects and programmes given technical and financial support by the CVC/COIN Vulnerabilised Groups Project, a sub-recipient of a Pan Caribbean Partnership against HIV and AIDS (PANCAP) grant provided by the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. Each report aims to highlight the contribution of Caribbean civil society organisations in responding to HIV and AIDS in vulnerable populations and presents promising programmes for scale-up by Caribbean states. For more information about CVC/COINs Vulnerabilised Groups Project visit www.focusright.org