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Supporting Tanzania’s Disease Outbreak and Pandemic Responses

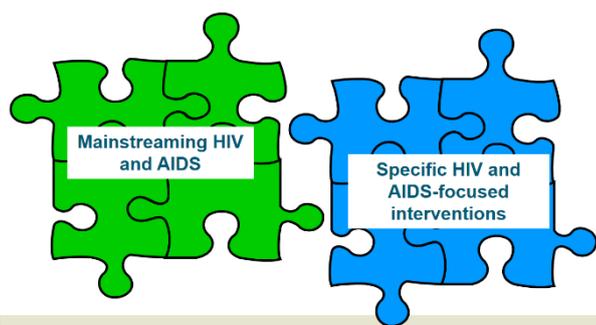
Community-focussed approaches, ranging from information access to rapid outbreak detection and action, enhance national responses to disease outbreaks and pandemics both now and into the future.

Throughout the life of the project, the Health Promotion and System Strengthening (HPSS) *Tuimarische Afya* Project funded by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and implemented by the Swiss Tropical and Public Health Institute (Swiss TPH), has provided the Government of Tanzania with rapid support to disease outbreaks and pandemic responses.

Approaches have varied according to the nature of each particular disease and specific contextual needs at the time. Some of these responses have been fully budgeted and others have been integrated into HPSS’s ongoing support and capacity building to strengthen community participatory health promotion techniques.

HIV

As the HIV pandemic had already become a protracted emergency in sub-Saharan Africa by the time HPSS was launched, the project took the **approach of mainstreaming HIV and AIDS, along with gender and social inclusion within all activities**. This comprised the development of **specific learning materials** designed for the target audience of HPSS staff, government, NGO and academic partners, **providing guidance on HIV and AIDS considerations in all aspects of core activities and approaches**.



To protect everyone from discrimination or marginalization, from its inception, the project developed the **HPSS HIV and AIDS in the Workplace Policy**, in compliance with existing national laws regarding HIV and AIDS, discrimination, working conditions, and safety and health, and with the ILO Code of Practice on HIV/AIDS and the World of Work.. This was posted in Swahili in all project offices and was supported by a committed **HIV focal person**, who was trained to provide confidential support to colleagues

and to regularly post service details including local voluntary and testing services. The Code has been updated throughout the life of the project and support in response to the HIV pandemic received a dedicated budget throughout phases 1 and 2 of the project.



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Cholera

In the winter of 2015, there was a cholera outbreak in the pilot region of Dodoma. Our colleagues on the ground were requested by the Ministry of Health to provide support. A rapid appraisal of the situation revealed **gaps in prevention**, as government action focused on clinical management of cases within the regional hospital. Via health, community development, schools and sanitation networks, HPSS supported government experts in **identifying outbreaks, contact tracing and implementing quarantine**. The project supported preventive public hygiene and sanitation measures, such as the **chlorination of community water tanks**. It also provided sterilization tablets for **water decontamination at the household and school levels**.



To sustain preventive behaviour change by ensuring clean domestic water and improving hygiene during water-related disease outbreaks, HPSS **promoted the sale of water decontamination tablets** in local shops to enable sustained access to **safe drinking water during seasonal disease vulnerability**. It also supported the Dodoma Regional Health Team to develop its **response and preparedness plan**, with a focus on prevention of regular outbreaks, by developing **customized participatory techniques to assist communities to identify the root causes of local infection**.

In recognition of the value of HPSS support to cholera prevention and the learning around outbreak prevention through community participatory health promotion techniques, SDC granted the project an additional CHF 50,000 budget line.

Acute liver disease

In June 2016, an outbreak of an **unknown disease was reported in clusters of families** in some communities within the Dodoma pilot region. Cases presented with jaundice and gastrointestinal symptoms that had an average case fatality rate of 30%, rising to 50% of cases among children below the age of 15 years. HPSS supported government duty-bearers including the **Regional Health Officer**, in **locating outbreak clusters and identifying the source as poorly stored, home-grown maize** that had grown moulds, producing **aflatoxins** and contributed in responding with public information on improved food storage to prevent acute aflatoxisis.



The project also provided **logistical support to enable the regional epidemiological team to rapidly collect data on the outbreak and supported regional authorities in developing a response and prepared strategy**.



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This activity did not have a dedicated budget, but the project integrated support as a real-time coaching exercise on applying community participatory health promotion in response to acute health needs.

COVID-19

The first case of Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) infection in Tanzania was reported on 17th March 2020. Since then, HPSS, together with other partners such as UNICEF, supported the Government of Tanzania to implement of its COVID-19 Emergency Response Plan and **contributing to the national COVID-19 Emergency Preparedness Task Force.**

HPSS reallocated an amount of CHF 222,000 to support the government in the COVID-19 response, out of which CHF 25,000 is dedicated to supporting Zanzibar. The project has been actively engaged in the Risk Communication and Community Engagement Pillar of the Emergency Response Plan by providing the following support:



Awareness raising of the signs and symptoms of COVID-19, transmission of the virus, knowledge on preventive measures and the importance of timely treatment seeking among health workers and communities including the most vulnerable in both mainland Tanzania and Zanzibar. To address the gap in public information, the project **printed and distributed 100,000 posters country-wide.** HPSS also supported the **airing of radio spots** produced by the government both on national and on local community radio stations.

The HPSS project also provides support to government **transport needs** related to the national COVID-19 response with use of its project vehicle fleet for central level activities and throughout the eight HPSS zonal offices.

In response to the massive need to address public and health authorities' concerns and lack of knowledge, to contain misinformation, and provide guidance on testing, care and treatment, HPSS jointly with UNICEF, IMA World Health and UNFPA supported the enhancement and capacity of the existing health hotline to provide a **national call centre** for COVID-19. Premises were fitted out effective working tools and technology and additional human resources. The **"Afya Call Centre" (Health Call Centre) for the Corona virus hotline "199"** was launched in May 2020 by the Minister of Health, Community Development, Gender, Elderly and Children (MoHCDGEC) the Hon. Ummu Mwalimu.



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The technical features of the call centre include an **interactive voice response (IVR) system** for automated answers that free operators to attend to more complex calls. The IT system can **technically accommodate 500 concurrent calls** and has the possibility to be connected with stations in other cities



across Tanzania. The Afya Call Centre operates **24 hours a day with two shifts of 40 operators each**. This has been a formidable challenge, as at times, **more than 250,000 calls** have been directed to the hotline, but since establishing the new IT system the call centre substantially increased the capacities of the Ministry of Health to respond to the high demand for support from the public.

HPSS's contributions to the national COVID-19 response, together with key national stakeholders, are designed to respond to the current crisis in Tanzania but also to strengthen future epidemic resilience of the country.

Background to the project

The Health Promotion and System Strengthening (HPSS) "Tuimarisho Afya" Project is part of the development cooperation between Tanzania and Switzerland, funded by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC). The HPSS project was launched in 2011 to pilot strengthening of health insurance, community participatory health promotion, pharmaceutical management and management of health technology in Dodoma Region. The project is currently in its third and final phase, during which the project is supporting the Government of Tanzania to scale-up approaches to all 26 regions, nationwide.

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