



STORIES FROM THE FIELD

Civil Society Commitment to Collaboration: The Foundation for Effective Advocacy in Chiapas

NGOs halt passage of law criminalizing HIV transmission—a story of collaboration, technical support, and timing.



Advocacy in Chiapas (September 9, 2009)
PHOTO CREDIT: Tuxtla Gutierrez (NotieSe)

“Community mobilization is not a linear process. Our group [of NGOs] was applying skills to organize a community forum. However, when the legislation was proposed, we had the resources, network, and relationships to organize an effective [advocacy] campaign.”

—NGO Representative

USAID | Health Policy Initiative, Task Order I
<http://www.healthpolicyinitiative.com>

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In a number of countries, legislative bodies are applying criminal law to persons living with HIV (PLHIV) who transmit or expose others to HIV infection. Many researchers and health professionals are concerned that these laws promote stigma and discrimination, reduce uptake of HIV testing, and decrease access to HIV prevention, treatment, and care services. Despite the fact that there is no evidence suggesting that the broad application of HIV-specific criminal law promotes health and human rights or reduces the number of new infections, countries, particularly in parts of Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean, have created HIV-specific laws that criminalize HIV transmission and exposure.

In Mexico, federal law and a number of state laws penalize transmission of an STI in specific cases that demonstrate intent to harm. However, when the Chiapas legislature proposed regulatory changes specifically criminalizing HIV transmission, a recently unified group of civil society organizations (CSOs) successfully led advocacy efforts to halt the bill’s passage in September 2009. Chiapas is a state in southern Mexico with an HIV prevalence rate above the national average.

The events leading to this effective advocacy campaign highlight the importance of strengthening civil sector capacity with sustained, purpose-driven technical assistance (TA). In this instance, the timeline below reflects how CSOs seized an opportunity to apply skills, resources, and lessons learned from TA provided by the USAID | Health Policy Initiative, Task Order I.

July 2009: CSOs from Chiapas are granted the opportunity to coordinate a three-day community forum. This forum precedes the 2009 National AIDS Congress to be held later this year in the same state. **Early August 2009:** CSOs requested the Health Policy Initiative to provide TA that covered strategic planning, policy dialogue facilitation, and coordination. The project also supported a stakeholder meeting between CSOs and key public officials to discuss the forthcoming forum. **Mid August:** Recognizing the importance of shared leadership, CSOs signed an accord committing themselves to collaboration. **Late August:** Coincidentally, the legislature proposed a law criminalizing HIV transmission. CSOs contacted the project for resources and TA to help formulate evidence-based messages, and establish links with other policy champions supported by the project. **September 2009:** CSOs in Chiapas coordinated a strong advocacy campaign. In response to the community mobilization, the Director of the National AIDS Program (CENSIDA), Dr. Jose Antonio Izazola, visited Chiapas to meet with the governor. Shortly thereafter, HIV-specific wording was removed from the proposed legislation.

Thus, a policy barrier was identified and removed as a result of CSO collaboration and shared leadership, sustained technical support, and timing.