

CIET

www.ciet.org
building the community voice into planning

Miscellaneous
MI-ZA-fs1-04-a

South Africa

***On the air:
life experience meets evidence on ART in South Africa***

On the air: life experience meets evidence on ART in South Africa

Zolani Mente thought that one time would not count. In the heat of moment, out of condoms, aroused, he and his partner gave in. “Just once,” Zolani said to himself. “It won’t make a difference.” It did. Five years after that turning point, Zolani, now 28, struggles with HIV. His blood is monitored regularly to check his immune status and he takes antiretrovirals (ARVs) regularly. He knows it is not for now, but probably for the rest of his life. He also knows it is the only way to have a life at all.

The story of Zolani, who lives in the Free State province of South Africa, embodies countless tales of HIV/AIDS, with one positive spin: he wants others to learn from his experience and he is doing something about it. “It is good to be able to talk to other people who live with HIV,” he says.

Zolani’s voice stands out in a recent audio drama developed by CIETafrica, a research NGO, based on its findings from a 2004 provincial study on people’s knowledge and beliefs about HIV/AIDS and ARVs. Canada’s International Development Research Centre (IDRC) funded the study.

With additional support from Research Matters, CIET produced the audio recording and the accompanying workbook in English and Sesotho. The organization plans to use these tools for community broadcast, discussion groups, airing in clinic waiting rooms and welfare pay points, training of health workers and volunteers, and life skills classes in provincial schools.

An explosive combination

Both CIET’s initiative and Zolani’s participation are timely indeed. As the CIET/IDRC study shows, less than half of the Free State population can identify the cause of AIDS and fully one-third thinks condoms will not protect them. Even those who think otherwise can fail to use them, like Zolani did.

And while Zolani knows there is a therapy and he benefits from it, not everyone does. In fact, lack of knowledge and misconceptions loom large on the road to effective antiretroviral therapy (ART). To start out with, only half of respondents had heard of ARVs, a dangerously low proportion considering that the government intends to make the therapy widely available. But even those who knew of ARVs did not always get it right: most thought HIV patients should start using them as soon as possible, when in fact the therapy is indicated whenever body defenses are too low.

CIET’s study revealed other challenges. Eight out of ten Free State dwellers had not been tested for HIV in the year before the survey, nor did they know where to do it. Even worse, six out of ten had no intention to be tested, all of this in a high-risk environment where not knowing one’s condition and not taking precautions makes everyone extremely vulnerable.

Some groups were more in need of accurate information on HIV/AIDS and ART, such as the elderly and the very poor, which calls for additional efforts to reach them.

Seen as a tightly knit pattern, all these signs amount to an explosive combination. Widespread attitudes and perceptions fuel HIV/AIDS, while lack of knowledge about ART blocks universal and timely access to this treatment, denying a longer and better life to those who carry the disease.

Audio drama and community dialogue

In this context, how can ART be effectively and efficiently implemented as a community resource? Community dialogue is the key, CIETAfrica has found. A person who had spoken to someone about HIV/AIDS was twice as likely to believe that the community could do something about it. Engaging families in HIV/AIDS discussion is equally crucial to ART policy: those who spoke with their families often about HIV/AIDS were more likely to believe ARVs can help someone with AIDS and to know when to receive the therapy.

Based on this evidence, CIETAfrica decided to take action. With four out of every five Free State households in possession of a working radio, audio recording emerged as a low-cost method of sharing findings with wider audiences. CIET, supported by Research Matters, developed and produced an audio drama as part of its ongoing “Beyond Victims and Villains” audio series, which aims to prevent sexual violence and HIV/AIDS and is currently being incorporated in life skills curricula across South Africa (for more information on the youth study that provides the evidence base for this series, visit www.ciet.org).

The new episode –*Understanding ARV*– is built as a discussion around beliefs and misconceptions emerging from the CIET/IDRC study. It features the story and experience of Zolani, and the voices of Mrs. Thembi Khumalo, an experienced social worker; Lele Moini, a CIET fieldworker who went from house to house during the Free State survey; and professor Neil Andersson, CIET’s executive director.

A much needed resource

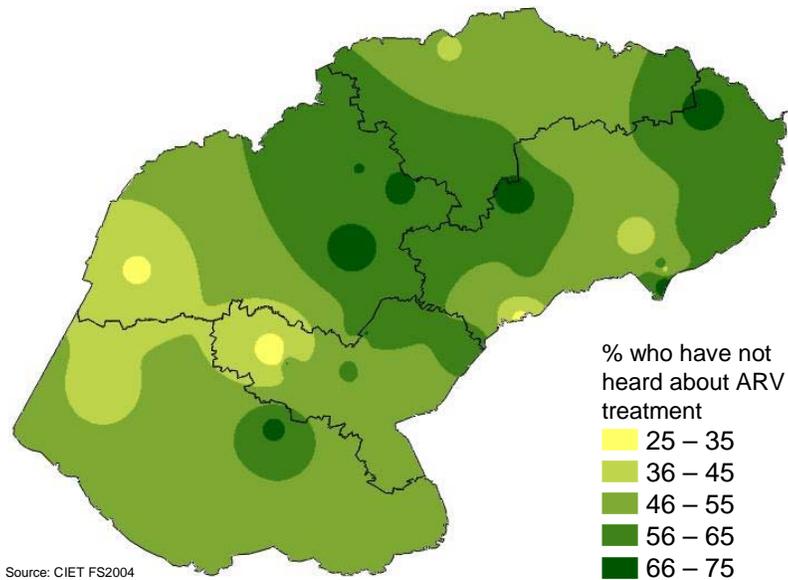
CIET will make the new episode available for broadcast in community radios, NGO-led discussion groups, training of health workers and life skills classes. The idea behind the intervention is simple: to engage people in dialogue around the findings, help dispel misconceptions, and contribute to greater, timely access to ART.

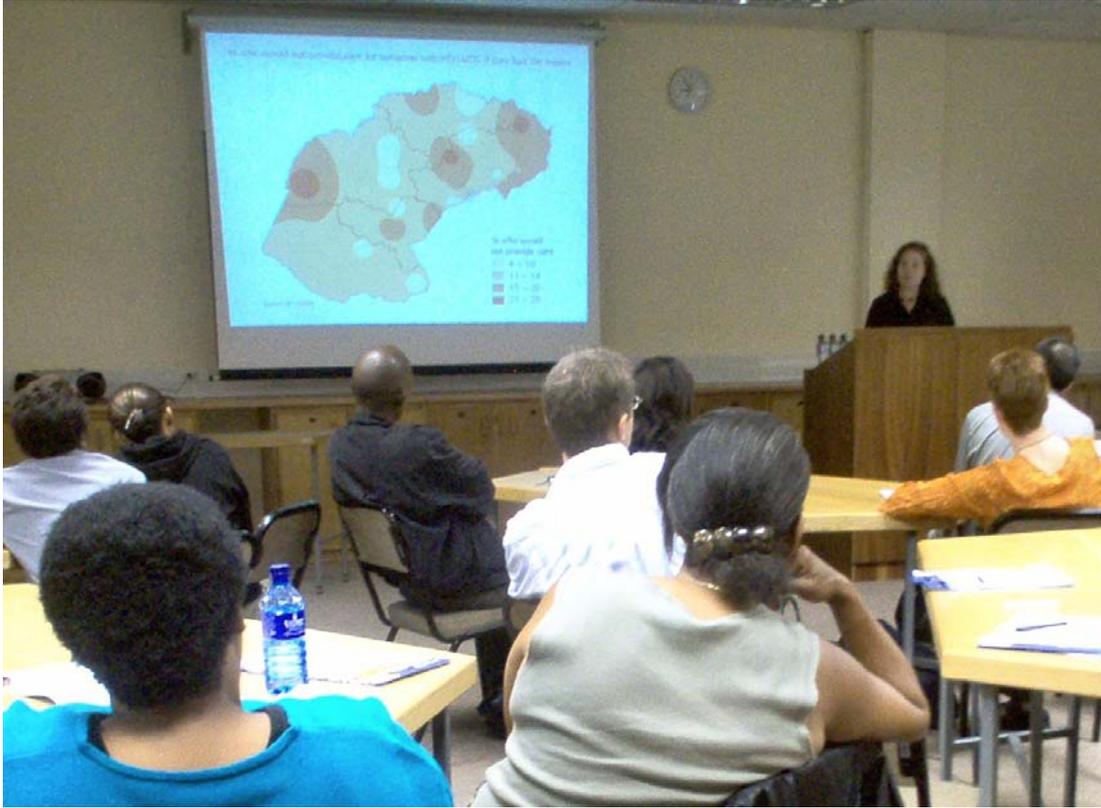
The recording was first aired to a group of community workers at the conference on “Expanded ARV treatment in the Free State: sharing experiences”, which was held at the University of the Free State in March 2005. As a result, the new audio drama improved with useful feedback. At the same time, it sparked provincial interest as a tool for community education and mobilization. Most listeners rated the episode as “excellent”,

well explained and very valuable for non-readers. Over 100 CDs were ordered by participants ranging from universities to public health workers.

CIETafrica will next train local facilitators from community organizations and the Free State Department of Health to use this tool in their own communities.

Free State: % who have not heard about anti-retroviral treatment





CIETAfrica shares the findings of the 2004 ARV study during a Free State provincial conference in Bloemfontein, Free State province, on April 1, 2005.