

“The Empower Project changed our lifestyle completely” **SUPPORT GROUP MEMBER**



INTERVIEW WITH THE EMPOWER PROJECT'S TEAM EMPOWERING USERS TO IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF HIV CARE: A CONTRIBUTION TO ENDING HIV IN SIERRA LEONE

What are the specific barriers to improving quality of HIV care in Sierra Leone?

Besides the low access to treatment, quality of care is a major problem for patients that results in poor retention in care and higher risk of treatment failure in a resources limited context. This poor national performance can be linked to two factors:

1/Low involvement of PLHIVs in decision making their rights and their health. Context of Sierra Leone is still characterized by widespread discrimination and stigmatization with regard to PLHIVs : only 6% of the population expresses an "attitude of acceptance" with regards to PLHIVs (DHS 2014). The National HIV/AIDS Commission Act passed in 2011, which protects the rights of PLHIVs, is neither known nor applied.

2/Besides, the health system is deficient in the provision of quality care. Qualified human resources to provide adequate treatment are lacking and difficult working conditions exacerbate the lack of communication between care-givers and patients and the negative attitudes towards each other's.

What has been the main contribution of the Empower project in the HIV response over the past 3 years?

The project "Empowerment of users for improved quality treatment of HIV care in Sierra Leone", also called the Empower Project, kicked off in early 2016 with the financial support of the French Development Agency (AFD), Sierra Leone Health Ministry, the Paris City, foundations and private donators. It allowed Solthis to bring together Patients and Health Care Workers to engage in a constructive dialogue and capacity building process, which has resulted in breaking the primary barriers on the way to end HIV in Sierra Leone.

The peculiarity and soundness of Solthis interventions in the context of HIV reponse in Sierra Leone, relies on the fact that strengthening both the demand and supply side of Health Services is the key for success. Indeed, under this 3 years project, Solthis has employed a three pronged approach to strengthen and build the capacity at the national level, health facility level and the community level. Through targeted trainings and tailored mentoring of health care workers and patient support group leaders and members, the project has not only transformed HIV care delivery in the 13 supported sites , but it has also empowered patients to claim for the quality of services they deserve, free of stigma and discrimination. Thanks to our key partners (the National AIDS Secretariat (**NAS**) and the National Aids/HIV Control Program (**NACP**) and the Network of HIV Positives in Sierra Leone (**NETHIPS**) strong engagement in the project, they have created a friendly environment to trigger a significant and positive change for HIV Care and Services.

“Interaction between Solthis staff, clinic staff and clients is so cordial and this has helped improve patients' care and confidence” **ONLINE SURVEY INFORMANT**



298
Health workers trained

+ 42 pts
in retention score of PLHIV in care

+25 trainings for support groups and NETHIPS

+46 pts in adherence score on treatment among PLHIV

Why is TB care integrated in the Empower project and what are the results today?

TB is the leading cause of death among PLHIVs in Sierra Leone with a co-infection rate around 13%. During these 3 years, the project advocated for improved collaboration between the HIV and TB programs both on guideline and policy development and implementation; at the facility level, through regular trainings and clinical mentoring on the integration of regular TB screening in routine HIV care provision, mentoring on diagnostic approaches as well as provision of preventive therapy. In total, 39 TB staff were also trained by the Empower team.



“Behavioral change is important in the fight against HIV and one of the gains made by the Empower project is the mind set change of support groups. They are now taking responsibility and ownership. This is an indication that some activities or best practices will be sustained” **ONLINE SURVEY INFORMANT**

How is Prevention of Mother -to-child HIV transmission (PTMC) integrated in the project and what are the key achievements today?

At the facility level, the Empower Project undertook activities to support uptake of HIV testing in antenatal care and all PMTCT entry units (such as maternity wards), and sustained uptake of antiretroviral therapy (ART) in HIV positive women. As a result of these activities : an uptake of HIV testing at ANC increased from 9,078 in 2017 to 14,379 tests in 2018 in 9 of the Empower Supported sites. Significant was Princess Christian Maternity Hospital (PCMH), the largest PMTCT clinic in the country with uptake at 100%. Retention of mothers in care increased from 61% at the end of 2017 to 84% in 2018 at PCMH.

At the National Level, we provided a continuous support through the technical working group for the development of the PMTCT strategy and other protocols. Finally, we conducted specific training for Private clinics to raise awareness on PMTCT and developed specific tools for referral to treatment sites.