REACHING VULNERABLE AND HIGH RISK GROUPS IN NIGERIA THROUGH OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING SYSTEM

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Abstract

Vulnerability however describes those features of a society, social or economic institution, or process that affect the likelihood that excess morbidity and mortality associated with disease will have a negative impact. These are beyond the natural factors associated with susceptibility; poverty, fragmented social issues, and gender inequality all exacerbate vulnerability. These deep rooted factors however, weaken people’s ability to cope with the impact of vulnerability and those with high-risk groups in any society, especially developing country like Nigeria. In the context of this paper, vulnerability means having no control over one’s risk of acquiring skills for self esteem, development and fulfillment as an individual in the society. Addressing vulnerabilities and high risk groups requires long term sustainable strategic solutions and interventions linked to the development process. This paper discussed various types or categories of vulnerable and high-risk groups in Nigeria to include women, young people, female sex workers, long distance truck drivers and commercial motorcyclists, military personnel and police officers, men who have sex with men and injection drug users. The authors also discussed how the case of vulnerability and high-risk groups in Nigeria could be reached with interventionist and development strategic programmes through open and distance learning system. Open and distance learning system was however chosen by the authors due to its unique characteristics in reaching the vulnerable and high-risks such as nomadic groups, refugees and inmates in other parts of the world. Conclusion was drawn and recommendations on the way forward were made.
One of the problems of most societies in the developing countries of the world is vulnerability and risk groups. This phenomenon has impacted negatively on the societies that experience them. Vulnerability describes those features of a society, social or economic institution, or process that affect the likelihood that excess morbidity and mortality associated with disease will have a negative impact. These factors include poverty, fragmented social issues and gender inequality. Development specialists contend that these deep rooted factors weaken people’s ability to cope with such factors of vulnerability. Addressing vulnerabilities therefore requires long term sustainable strategic solutions linked to the development process.

On the other hand, high risk groups engage in risky behaviours such as unsafe sex, commercial sex, injection of drug use with commercial needles and substance abuse, which beclouds judgment about unprotected sex. For interventions to be effective, programme designers and development experts such as adult educators must clearly understand the factors that drive people to risky behaviours.

In Nigeria, high-risk groups include female sex workers (FSWs), distance truck drivers, commercial motorcyclists, military personnel, police officers, migrant and mobile populations, prisoners, men who have sex with men, and injection drug users.

Vulnerable and high-risk populations vary from place to place and depend on the prevalent behavior patterns and socio-cultural context. In Nigeria, vulnerable groups include women, youth and orphans, sex workers, prisoners, military personnel, migrant workers and other mobile people, etc. Other subgroups, of course, could emerge and be classified as high risk. Each subpopulation has its own epidemiology, context, issues relating to vulnerability and risks, and challenges in terms of being reached with interventions.

Interventions through open and distance education programmes could provide a very important alternative strategy of reaching the vulnerable and risk groups in Nigeria. The last ten years have seen an increase in the use of open and distance learning system particularly in developing countries like Nigeria for various development intervention programmes in the context of learning to know, learning to do, learning to be and learning to live together which provides the enhanced opportunities that are essential for full citizenship in the knowledge society. Within the context of this paper, the authors believes very strongly that the vulnerable and high risk groups could be reached to change their high risk behaviours through open and distance learning.
Characteristics of Vulnerable and High Risk Groups in Nigeria

Women
In most developing countries, women have been found to be more vulnerable and at high risk than men (Onwulin & Oluwatoyin, 2009). Women should not of course, be treated as a homogenous group. They may however, be poor or rich, young or old, educated or uneducated, in purdal as in the case of northern parts of Nigeria or not – and each has different needs requiring specific targeted performance interventions. Both the low status of women and the other gender issues that place them at risk complicate the picture the more especially in developing country like Nigeria.

Thus, more women specific and comprehensive interventions are needed to respond to the causes of women’s vulnerabilities and risk. Development experts are of the opinion that there should be components and institutions to address such issues as sexuality, family, culture, empowerment, self-esteem, negotiating skills, violence, and interventions in various community settings which cause vulnerability among the women folk.

Young People
Young people are not a homogenous group of course and they can be categorized in many ways, such as by gender, school status and marital status (Donald, 2010). Such classifications usually help us understand what makes them vulnerable, why they engage in high risk behaviours, and what kinds of interventions are appropriate.

In-school youth include those in primary, secondary, and tertiary schools. They are usually literate and because they attend school, they tend to be easier to reach with prevention and risk factors interventions, including the integration of state of the art, information on prevention of risk factors which could lead to vulnerability and thus prevent being a member of risk group.

Out-of-school youth include street children and hawkers, unemployed youths, artisans, and unskilled labourers. They are often engaged in some economic activity that provides them with access to disposable income, which in turn allows them to engage in risky behaviours such as unsafe sex.

Female Sex Workers
In many societies, sex work is illegal resulting in clandestine practices. Nigeria is no exception, with a constitution that is silent on sex work (Onwulin & Oluwatoyin, 2009). As a result, sex workers, brothel operators, implementing partners and even policy makers are uncertain of the legal status of sex work. Nigeria is guided by two legal frameworks: the penal code, which operates in northern Nigeria, and the criminal code, which operates in southern Nigeria. However, both codes...
criminalize sex work and therefore, hinder advocacy efforts on behalf of sex workers’ rights. The recent adoption of the Moslem Sharia Law in some parts of the country has resulted in sex work going underground or relocating to other, more conducive environments, making it more difficult to reach the female sex worker (FSWs) with interventions.

FSWs in Nigeria are characteristically poor, marginalized, and stigmatized. They lack both formal education and empowerment. Frequency of sex with multiple partners and a high burden of Sexually Transmitted Disease (STDs) usually place them at very high risk and vulnerable as they often engage in unprotected sex and other risk behaviours, such as substance abuse (Odogun, 2008).

Long-Distance Truck Drivers and Commercial Motorcyclists
Long distance truck drivers in Africa, India, and Thailand have been found to participate in vigorous sexual cultures at roadside settlements and border crossings whose transient resident include poor, often young women from rural areas. Many of these truckers have multiple sexual partners and they spread many diseases through the rural byways. Although long-distance truck drivers have long been implicated in very high risk behaviours which expose them to many problems. The commercial motorcyclists, who tend to be much younger have access to disposable income, which they often use to engage in high risk sexual behaviour.

Military Personnel and Police Officers
Sexual aspects of the military environment contribute to their high risk and vulnerable behaviour, problem due to their age group (15 – 24 years old); a professional ethos that excuses risk taking; and lengthy periods away from home, which can result in their purchasing of sex to relieve loneliness (UNAIDS, 2003). In concert, these factors place military and police personnel at high risk and vulnerable groups of any society.

Migrant and Mobile Population
Seasonal workers, including rural farmers, are often away from home for long periods of time, and the social disruption and loneliness resulting from their immigration is associated with a higher incidence of casual sexual partners. While away from home, loneliness and stress drive many of these migratory laborers to frequent FSWs. Sexual contact between migrant men and FSWs has helped spread many diseases, thereby placing them at very high risk and vulnerable groups.

Conversely, women whose partners are migratory workers may resort to commercial sex work for economic survival while their partners are absent. The migration of other workers including civil servants, business executives, bankers, salesmen, and politicians – both within and
between states also poses a major risk factor, as they often engage in unprotected sex away from home. At the same the work place provides an ideal organized setting to reach these workers with behavior change communication programme.

Men Who Have Sex with Men

Homosexuality is not prominent in Nigeria. Possibly because male to male sex is highly stigmatized; in some culture it is either a taboo or legally prohibited. Some sex contacts are becoming increasingly practiced, however, and those who engage in them, are becoming more open about it. The use of alcohol and illicit drugs continues to be prevalent among some men who have sex with men (MSM) and is linked to risk for HIV and other STIs. The stigma associated with homosexuality makes reaching MSM very difficult. It is therefore important that efforts be made to break all barriers so they can be offered AIDS education, preventive services and HIV care.

Injection Drug Users

Using or sharing unsterile needles when injecting heroin, cocaine, or other drugs leaves people vulnerable to contracting or transmitting HIV. Another way people may be at risk for contracting HIV is simply by using drugs of abuse, as research has shown that drug and alcohol use can impair judgment and increase the likelihood of engaging in unplanned and unprotected sex (Madubike, Onwulin & Chukwuma, 2003). Although research has been scanty on the HIV prevalence among drug users in Nigeria, anecdotal data suggest that it is on the rise as more Nigerians are involved in drug use, including alcohol (Mark, 1999).

Interventions through Open and Distance Learning System (ODL)

Interventions targeted at vulnerable and high risk groups are therefore implemented by government agencies in collaboration with development partners, civil society organizations, and the vulnerable groups themselves. Even though several interventions are ongoing, the response is still inadequate. A 2005 World Bank report states that the failure to reach people with the highest risk behaviours has likely reduced the efficiency and impact of assistance (Barnett, 2002). The government, international donor agencies, and development partners have supported numerous programmes whose strategies for working with vulnerable and high risk groups include prevention, care, Support, treatment, and impact mitigation.

In many parts of the world especially, the developing countries, open and distance learning (ODL) system has been usually employed as an alternative educational strategies for reaching the vulnerable and high risk groups in form of interventions. Open and distance learning on the other hand is a way of providing learning opportunities that is characterized by the
separation of teacher and learner in time or place, or both time and place; learning that is certified in some way by an institution or agency; the use of a variety of media, including print and electronic; two-way communications that allow learners and tutors to interact; the possibility of occasional face-to-face meetings; and a specialized division of labour in the production and delivery of courses (UNESCO, 2002). For example, the Philippines see distance learning as an alternative delivery mode that reaches out to learners – including children and young people – in underserved, high-risk and disadvantaged areas, especially those affected by conflict (UIL, 2009).

**Prevention**

Interventions targeting vulnerable and high-risk groups resemble those targeting the general population. Consequently, open and distance learning has been seen as the most efficient and effective educational intervention delivery mode to reach these groups in the context of preventing the vulnerable and high-risk groups from risk behaviours such as unprotected sex.

Efforts to raise awareness, which includes sensitization and mobilization of the subgroups through outreach activities and rallies could be better achieved through, open and distance learning through radio jingles, television broadcasts and cinema showing or viewing programmes.

Open and distance learning system could easily assist or be helpful in the development and distribution of information, education and communication (IEC) materials, such as leaflets, posters and face caps by posting information via e-mail and bulletin boards to individuals and groups or through the internet connection. The use of mass media which is actually an open learning system has been very effective in providing both print and broadcast outlets in reaching the vulnerable and high-risk groups with prevention programmes aimed at reducing risk behaviours among the subgroups. Unfortunately, prevention efforts have been neither comprehensive enough nor implemented at a scale large enough to make a meaningful impact in the vulnerable and high-risk groups.

**Impact Mitigation**

The links between poverty, and the vulnerable and high-risk groups has been well established, with poverty contributing to the increasing vulnerability of certain individuals, especially women and girls.

The Nigerian government has launched initiatives aimed at alleviating poverty in the general population. These efforts include the National Poverty Alleviation Programme (NAPEP), the National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS), and the New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD). The Federal Ministry for Women’s Affairs and...
Social Development also has a programme for orphans and vulnerable children that is part of federal government’s impact mitigation strategies for the vulnerable and high-risk groups.

Many Non-Governmental Organizations have supported vocational skills acquisition for vulnerable and high-risk groups. These are inadequate, however, as the lack of economic empowerment could further increase the vulnerability of the groups. Despite the Merits of the poverty reduction strategies with other intervention programmes impact remain weak and require strengthening.

Observers and development experts have opined that one way of reaching these vulnerable and high risk groups is through open and distance learning system. One of such programmes include the school-based programmes. These programmes serve in-school and out-of-school youths in secondary and tertiary institutions through open and distance learning system. Radio programmes could focus on the vulnerable youths and out-of-school children on issues like discipline and the need to be a good citizen.

Another project could be motor park projects. Through open and distance learning, with the assistance of peer educators the idea of vocational skills training could reach these vulnerable and high risk groups who are usually found at the motor parks. Junction town projects is also one of the ways in which vulnerable and high-risk groups could be reached through open and distance learning systems. These projects target long distance truck drivers, the female sex workers (FSWs) they patronize and vulnerable street hawkers at junction towns with HIV education, condom promotion, and other prevention strategies.

Sex work projects. These programmes include both brothel and non-brothel based. Interventions targeting at FSWs, their partners and clients, and brothel managers are provided through open and distance learning system to these groups. Among the initiatives are HIV/AIDS educational prevention programmes, condom marketing, the training of peer educators and the empowerment of sex workers through vocational training midwife through open and distance learning system (ODL).

Challenges

Most of the intervention programmes for the vulnerable and high-risk groups actually do not reach. In some cases, Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) find it challenging to reach these youth and must develop innovative ways to reach them. More so, most of the government intervention programmes also fail in reaching the vulnerable and high-risk groups due mainly to their characteristics. Most of them are
migrants and therefore, hard to reach with intervention programmes. Even with the use of open and distance learning system which is viewed as an alternative intervention strategy, it is still very difficult to reach these groups at a maximum percentage.

Conclusion
The low economic status of female sex workers (FSWs) heightens their vulnerability as they engage in unprotected sex. At other times they may be raped or coerced into violent sex; dry sex with its consequent abrasion and bleeding, increasing their risk of contracting HIV. They are disadvantaged by a lack of self-esteem and adequate negotiation skills, which compromises their ability to manage the situation and seek legal action. In addition, FSWs face constant sexual harassment and abuse from law enforcement agents such as police officers. They may be forced to have sex without condoms, sometimes at gun point, and their money and valuable may be seized.

Recommendations
Unfortunately, prevention efforts, have been neither comprehensive enough nor implemented at a scale large enough to make a meaningful impact on the vulnerable and high-risk groups.
For this reason, some programmes which integrate care and support into prevention should be mounted by governments, non-governmental organizations and civil society organizations.
As young people become sexually active, they should be provided with basic education regarding sex education to avoid their engaging in risk behaviours. Reaching the vulnerable and high-risk groups with poverty alleviation programmes should be encouraged.

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