

WE DEMAND OST NOW - HOW SUCCESSFUL PWUD-LED CAMPAIGN FAST-TRACKED INITIATION OF OST SERVICES IN KWALE COUNTY, KENYA.

Said A¹ Maina C¹ Bati I² Makenzi B³ Sulliman F⁴

Abstract

Issue: Opioid Substitution Therapy (OST) was introduced in Kenya in 2014. By September 2015, 4 OST sites had been established in Nairobi, Kilifi and Mombasa Counties. Despite having a high burden of drug use, Kwale County lagged behind.

Setting: Kwale County is located on the Kenyan Coast, and is characterised by a high burden of drug use with approximately 4500 People Who Use/Inject Drugs (PWU/ID). PWUD in Kwale were highly stigmatized by the public, law enforcers and health workers. Many were imprisoned or lynched due to petty crimes. HIV and TB Treatment default was high. Neighbouring counties with OST were reporting improved health outcomes among PWID on OST.

Key argument: In 2015, Teens Watch Centre, a CSO serving PWID in Kwale carried out focus group discussions (FGD) with PWID from 23 drug using hotspots in preparation for OST initiation. Respondents expressed willingness and readiness to enrol for OST and recommended placement of OST services near to drug using hot spots. Government authorities however preferred a distant location next to a health facility and drug rehabilitation centre. The lack of consensus delayed OST initiation. By mid-2016, Kwale's frustrated PWU/ID community organized public demonstrations, demanding for OST.

Outcomes and implications: With sustained lobbying and media coverage of PWU/ID demonstrations, by mid-2017, Government authorities, CSOs, development partners and donors committed to initiating OST in Kwale within 4 months. By October 2017, the first OST clinic was opened. Currently, the clinic serves 967 PWUDs of which 5% are female, 67% inject heroin and 18% are HIV+ all virally suppressed.

Sustained advocacy by Kwale's PWUD community fast tracked initiation of OST in Kwale County. Service uptake was rapid with over 90% retention rate and improved ART adherence. Community involvement in decision making concerning services targeting PWUD is vital before and during implementation.

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