Change Story 3:
SANPUD Spurs Meaningful Involvement of People who Use Drugs in the Fight Against HIV in South Africa

Introduction
Until the formation and professionalization of the South African Network of People who Use Drugs (SANPUD), there was a lack of meaningful involvement of people who use drugs (PWUD) in the fight against HIV in South Africa. PWUD were not able to provide input on the policies and programmes that directly affected their health and survival. Thanks to the support of INPUD and Bridging the Gaps, PWUD are increasingly involved in these processes via SANPUD, which serves as an entity that connects the community of PWUD to policy makers and other stakeholders, and successfully advocates for policy change.

Problem
Meaningful engagement of key populations is essential in ending AIDS as a public health emergency. Meaningful participation is not possible unless key populations are recognised as equal partners, properly funded and capacitated. In the South African context, there are three major barriers preventing people who use drugs from meaningfully participating in drug policy making and service implementation: stigma and criminalisation, a lack of access to comprehensive services, and a lack of financial resources to support community mobilisation. Until 2018, there was no community-led drug user organisation to bridge this gap between PWUD and policy makers and other stakeholders.

Due to lack of opportunities for PWUD to meaningfully engage in the process, most strategic and policy documents concerning drugs and public health in South Africa were produced without any input from PWUD. Although there was a large investment in the fight against HIV in South Africa, there was a lack of focus on the specific needs of PWUD. Harm reduction was initiated in 2014, much later than in many other countries, but funding for harm reduction did not include support for community mobilisation. Lacking access to knowledge, health services, allies and unable to challenge the mainstream narrative and call for immediate action, the South African community of people who use drugs was facing the epidemic alone.

Change
With the support of INPUD and Bridging the Gaps, SANPUD was founded and is now fully functional, sustainable and well positioned in the South African civil society environment. SANPUD was legally registered in 2018, and spent 2019 ramping up organisational capacity: establishing a functional board, appointing core staff and securing new funding. The organisation is now financially secure until 2021, receiving support from the Global Fund and Robert Carr Fund in addition to Bridging the Gaps.

Bridging the Gaps is an international HIV programme with a focus on the health and rights for LGBT people, sex workers and people who use drugs, currently operating in fifteen countries. For more information on the programme, visit www.hivgaps.org.
Via SANPUD, PWUD are now contributing to decisions through representation in governmental or civil society consultation bodies. PWUD participate in meetings with local law enforcement agencies and provide training on harm reduction and human rights, as well as link PWUD with medical services. SANPUD has also contributed to various reports and articles, such as the UNODC report on violence against women who use drugs in South Africa. SANPUD was also successful in lobbying for an additional EUR 600,000 for people who use drugs in the South African Global Fund grant.

Thanks to SANPUD and its partners, the term ‘harm reduction’ is now mentioned in the National Drug Master Plan (2018-2022) implemented by the Ministries of Justice, Health, and Social Development. The plan mandates consultation with people who use drugs in the development process, and includes opioid substitution therapy and needle and syringe services as key indicators. These items did not exist in previous national plans.

**CONTRIBUTION**

INPUD has been supporting SANPUD since 2015 to become the independent and secure organisation it is today. INPUD, as the global network of PWUD, identified the main priorities in terms of the health and rights of the drug user community and used them as global advocacy priorities. INPUD fought for including these priorities in UN Declarations, UN guidelines and recommendations, and SANPUD used these documents to influence change at country level. Joint INPUD and SANPUD advocacy in spaces like the UN Commission on Narcotic Drugs contributed to the South African government’s improved view on the role of communities in drug policy making. This change ensures that the specific needs of PWUD are incorporated into country level policies and programmes to fight HIV.

**ANALYSIS**

Key populations have demonstrated their capacity to put in place the most effective actions to determine radical reforms needed to fight AIDS. In South Africa, the registration and financial sustainability of SANPUD is essential in ensuring that PWUD have a voice and they can contribute meaningfully to the implementation of strategies and approaches that improve accessibility, acceptability, availability and uptake of interventions for PWUD affected by HIV. As a legally registered community-led organisation, SANPUD has legitimacy, direct contact with the concerned community, and can access first-hand information and expertise not available to policy makers and other stakeholders.

**LOOKING AHEAD**

Law enforcement officers trained by SANPUD in 2018 and 2019 acknowledged positive changes in their perception on people who use drugs once they got to understand the challenges they face, as described by drug users themselves. SANPUD should continue sensitisation and training of law enforcement officers and other staff from medical services, prisons, social services. SANPUD will likely play an important role at a regional level, contributing to the formation AfricaNPUD as well as in global level advocacy.

**PERSONAL STORY**

Connie van Staden is one of the first peers who was initiated into the needle and syringe programme provided by OUT Wellbeing in Gauteng. Connie’s life took a new turn when he got involved as a community organiser and later as SANPUD staff. Working with law enforcement officers, organising community events and addressing the needs of community in his own terms made a huge difference. Currently functioning as SANPUD Communications specialist in Gauteng, he is a community trainer and local coordinator. Connie is also the Chairman of Drug Users Gauteng.

“They (SANPUD) have given me an opportunity to have positive change in my life and, the biggest of all, they have given me a platform where I can save lives and change other people’s lives... That’s why the projects that I deal with is 100% peer-led, and that is the key to being successful. Peer-led and network-led projects giving people an opportunity to have equal employment, equal housing, this is the only way we can survive, and we can make changes in the lives of people.”

– Connie