



Lessons Learned

Lessons learned at Equidad's HIV/STI
testing centres for MSM in Ecuador

THE ECUADORIAN FOUNDATION EQUIDAD (EFE)

*Community Testing Centre in Guayaquil,
Community Testing Centre in Quito*

LESSONS LEARNED AT THE EFE HIV/ STI TESTING CENTRES FOR MSM

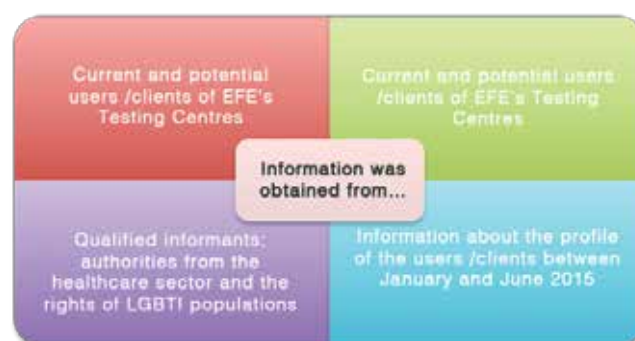
A Latin American country of 14 million inhabitants, Ecuador is located between Peru and Colombia. Homosexuality was considered a crime in Ecuador until 18 years ago when the country's Constitutional Court decided to revoke the law that criminalised it. Since then, there have been significant changes in the national legislation, including a constitutional provision that explicitly prohibits discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity, rules that punish hate crimes, and affirmative action particularly in the public arena. These developments have been accompanied by a cultural change towards greater respect for the rights of people of sexual diversity. Despite these positive changes, Ecuadorian society still has many forms of discrimination and prejudice, some of which are found in the legislation.

It is in this context that the **Fundación Ecuatoriana Equidad** ('Ecuadorian Foundation EQUIDAD', EFE) was created 15 years ago. EFE seeks to promote sexual health and to reduce prejudice and acts of discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity or HIV/AIDS. Through its communication campaigns and prevention activities, its promotion of awareness, empowerment, visibility and citizen participation, and its own research, but also by coordinating with private, national and international civil society and public institutions and by generating tools and resources, EFE seeks to improve the quality of life for the LGBTI community and those affected by HIV/AIDS.

BACKGROUND TO THIS REPORT

The structure of this report reflects three stages: a) the collection of information, b) the analysis of the information and c) the identification of lessons learned. The latter activity was used to deepen effective practices in connection with the initial draft of this document, together with the EFE team.

In the process, we interviewed both providers and users / clients of the various services offered at EFE's Community Testing Centres: voluntary HIV/STI-testing, psychological and medical care, legal advice and community peer support. We also met with key informants including national and local authorities who work with the healthcare sector and give attention to the LGBTI community. Finally, between January and June 2015, a profile of the Testing Centres' users / clients was identified on the basis of files in EFE's archives.



COMMUNITY CENTRES THAT OFFER HIV TESTING:

Description of the services

The initiative to create community testing centres that offer access to voluntary testing for the prevention and early detection of HIV (**'Acceso a Pruebas Voluntarias de VIH'**, more commonly referred to there as APV) was a response to a need identified during EFE's first year of work. This service was developed as part of the project known as 'Bridging the Gaps: Health and rights for key populations'. The Bridging the Gaps project aims to ensure an adequate governmental response to HIV, to help reduce stigma and discrimination of people who are living with HIV (PLHIV), and to help secure the rights of LGBTI people. Among the key activities of this project are HIV and STI prevention and the early diagnosis of infections as well as ensuring access to treatment for people who are currently living with HIV. The project also seeks to strengthen the capacity of different civil society organisations and thus to support their actions in various countries.

In relation to EFE, the Bridging the Gaps project aims first of all to strengthen prevention activities and health programmes, especially early access to HIV testing (APV). Secondly, it aims to defend the rights of LGBTI people by supporting them through the drafting of reports on respect for or violation of human rights and by means of the recently established Juridical LGBTI Clinic, which advises and legally sponsors cases involving discrimination or human rights violations.

It is thanks to the Bridging the Gaps project that EFE maintains a community testing centre in both Quito and Guayaquil, aimed at the prevention and early detection of HIV and various STIs and offering free testing. Although anyone can make use of these services, the foundation focuses on LGBTI people and especially MSM. Besides testing, EFE also offers professional medical consultations for community members in Guayaquil and both medical and psychological services in Quito.

A gradual increase in the number of people who benefit from EFE's services has been identified. In 2014, 850 HIV tests were administered, while already in the first six months of 2015, 517 HIV tests had been provided, suggesting an increase in the number of HIV tests carried out between 2014 and 2015.

USERS / CLIENTS OF THE EFE COMMUNITY TESTING CENTRE IN QUITO:

The main users / clients are young men and students

Information is collected and filed on each user / client's visit and on each test administered, enabling some characterisation of those who make use of the EFE Testing Centre in Quito. Of the 517 tests administered there during the first half of 2015, 483 were given to men and 34 were given to women. Most of the users were young male homosexual students as shown in the following charts:

Figure 2: Gender of the users / clients of the Testing Center in Quito:

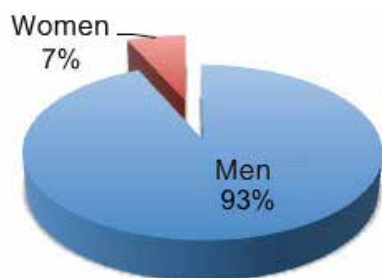


Figure 3: Sexual orientation of the users / clients:

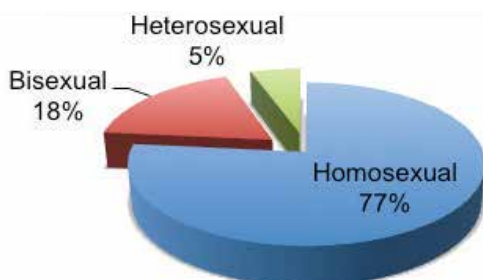


Figure 4. Occupation of the users / clients (work/study):

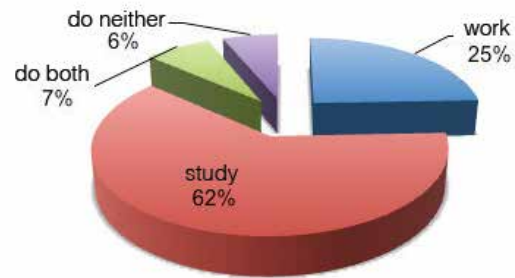
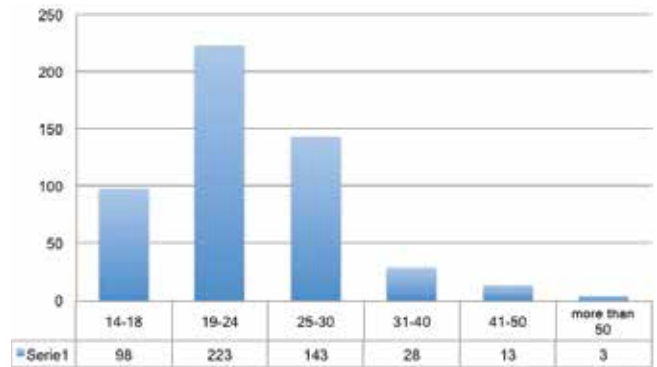


Figure 5: Age range of the users / clients:



As the charts above show, 93% of tests carried out in Quito were performed on men; 77% of the recipients there identified themselves as homosexual (gay or lesbian), 18% as bisexual, and 5% as heterosexual. Based on the intake information that users / clients filled in on the 'characterological tab' (which asks them to identify their occupation in terms of work, study, both, or neither), 62% of the users / clients of the Testing Centre in Quito were students, while 25% had jobs. In terms of their age, 91% of users there were under 30; the age group 19 to 24 was the most significant, constituting 43.9% of those who required HIV and STI testing during the first half 2015.

LESSONS LEARNED:

The data obtained in the analysis and evaluation of the project conducted by the EFE's Community Testing Centres in Quito and Guayaquil provided EFE with information about one of its main services but also helped it maintain and enhance its strengths and implement remedial measures as appropriate. As one of the aims of this report is to share EFE's experiences with similar organisations, it will focus on the most important lessons from the process of implementing the project and from running the Community Testing Centres for MSM.

A team with experience, expertise, and empathy for the LGBTI community:

One of the main strengths of EFE is its team and their clear commitment and dedication to the areas in which the foundation is active. All of the team members interviewed had a detailed knowledge of the activities of EFE, its main principles and values, and the rights of LGBTI people. There were a number of things about the Community Testing Centre in Quito that led its most important group of users / clients (MSM) to have confidence in the centre: the fact that 89% of the EFE team self-identifies as LGBTI, but also their capacity for empathy, their respect for confidentiality, and their sensitivity to certain issues, all of which go beyond the requirements of a normal job or occupation. EFE sees the peer counselling it offers as a major feature of its identity. The EFE team consists of activists and professionals with extensive and recognized experience in the field. The foundation also does its best to maintain a pleasant working environment and to ensure that the team members receive continual training. Indeed, each of the team members interviewed had followed at least one course or training process during the previous year.

National authorities also identified the team's stability as a sign of the quality of EFE's work: 'The permanence of the directors and employees is very important, as their experience is consistent and improves each time. By comparison, the high turnover rate in government offices makes it difficult for those offices to provide continuity in projects.'

According to the national authorities interviewed, EFE's focus is one of its strengths. Unlike other agencies that provide similar services, EFE specialises in people of sexual diversity, primarily gays and lesbians. Its close connection with the LGBTI community thus engenders greater confidence among its users / clients. They find it highly approachable, with access to facilities that are friendly and professional but not prejudiced. The advice and counselling they receive there are also much more comfortable because the counsellors are also activists themselves and show empathy and respect for the community they are helping. This has allowed them to work effectively with a population whom others still find it a taboo to support.'

The communication of HIV/STI test results to clients takes place within a counselling process. The question-and-answer format in that process allows the EFE staff to address the topics of sexual risks and prevention practices. All staff and service providers are familiar with the process and how to follow it.

Together with the Ecuadorian Ministry of Public Health, EFE developed a Counselling Manual or script that can be used when counselling clients after they have received their HIV/STI test results. This manual / script needs be updated and transformed into a friendlier format that will reflect the experience and address the health issues of LGBTI people.

HIV/STI testing: The main part of EFE's portfolio

EFE began its work in Ecuador 15 years ago, just three years after a decision by the Constitutional Court eliminated the crime of homosexuality. EFE's work has made the foundation a reference point for the rights of LGBTI people. Fighting against the discrimination of homosexuals and promoting HIV prevention have been the foundation's main concerns throughout the past 15 years.

Today, the free testing for HIV/STI is the activity most often mentioned by those who know and visit EFE. Of the people who were interviewed for this report, 84% were aware of the existing HIV/STI testing services, while 70% of those interviewed in Quito and 44% of those interviewed in Guayaquil knew of the complementary services of medical and/or psychological care.

The Community Testing Centres and the HIV and STI testing services they offer are clearly at the heart of EFE and form one of the most important activities developed there. Everything indicates that the opportunity of getting tested in a friendly environment while also receiving counselling and having the ability to participate in activities targeting the LGBTI population make EFE a comfortable and reliable option for LGBTI people who want to get tested. Especially considering that the services at the Testing Centres are free of charge and the test results are delivered quickly, it is easy to understand why young students form its largest group of users / clients.

One topic of continual debate at EFE is whether to have just one person be responsible for this testing service or to have everyone be able to offer it. Prior to the Bridging the Gaps project, but also during the initial period of this project one person had been responsible for the testing service. When that person left EFE in the course of 2015, the EFE changed its policy to require all staff members in Quito to be able and willing to perform the tests whenever a client arrived who required a test. Most of the staff members find the new policy to be problematic as they say it keeps them from fulfilling their other obligations in connection with their specific projects and because it means there is no longer one person who is fully responsible for testing.

Other staff members maintain that it is an advantage that all employees are able to provide testing.

Strategies for the testing centres: Choosing the right location and organising activities amongst peers:

In both Quito and Guayaquil, the EFE Testing Centre is strategically located in an area that is popular with the LGBTI community. Both locations were chosen to facilitate access. As the surveys of users / clients of the Testing Centres have shown, both locations do play a positive role in their decision to go and request testing in the first place.

Another lesson learned – **in addition to the importance of choosing the right location** – is that it has proven beneficial for the community testing centres to organise welcoming events in the form of recreational and cultural activities including lectures and seminars, film forums, and even karaoke evenings. Such events have turned the EFE facilities into safe spaces and meeting places, giving attendees the opportunity to become potential users / clients of the Testing Centre's services. These cultural and recreational activities function as ways of advertising EFE's services to the target population they want to reach. By making it easier for members of that population to approach EFE for testing, such activities actually help to promote prevention. As a result of their popularity, the EFE facilities have proved to be too small in relation to the number of visitors they now receive.

Communication and publicity about the (testing) services:

Although most users of the EFE facilities came to know about the foundation by word of mouth (friends and acquaintances), EFE also uses several other communication and publicity techniques to offer their services and spread their mission. Those include on-site activities as well as a presence on social networks and the Internet.

- Website: <http://www.equidadglbti.com/>
- Facebook profile: Fundación Ecuatoriana Equidad (Ecuadorian Foundation EQUIDAD)
<https://www.facebook.com/fundacionecuatoriana.equidad/?pnref=story>
- Profile Twitter: [@Fequidad](https://twitter.com/Fequidad)

These tools, including the use of social networks, allow for the promotion of activities and provide an opportunity to interact with users who are interested in attending the Testing Centres.

For several years, EFE also broadcast a radio show, **La Note Fuerte**, twice a week through the Public Radio of Ecuador.

As part of the same communication strategy that reaches out to the LGBTI community, EFE also consistently participates in activities held in public spaces such as fairs and the annual Gay Pride Parade.

It is clearly important to communicate the activities and services that EFE provides, also considering the opportunities that creates for exchanging ideas with the beneficiaries of those activities. By taking advantage of technology and social networking, EFE is broadening its access to its target population while also promoting the services and other activities it offers.

Monitoring user satisfaction at the EFE Testing Centres:

For the future of the foundation, it is very important to receive feedback from those who use it. Keeping track of quality and user satisfaction has been done through two mechanisms over time: a suggestion box and periodic surveys. In this process, there is an opportunity for growth and learning. In addition to the suggestion box, there were forms with multiple-choice questions that resulted in many more comments and general suggestions from users and led to a decrease in the number of suggestions that were received in the box.

A drawback of surveys that are only held sporadically is that they only reflect the opinions, observations or complaints of those users / clients who happened to be there on that particular day.

The lesson that EFE has learned from this concerns the importance of constantly monitoring user / client satisfaction and of having convenient forms that users / clients can fill in to provide their feedback.

To guarantee user / client satisfaction it is necessary to use this mechanism and to designate one person who will be responsible for keeping track of any feedback received in the suggestion box, who will channel the research and see to it that corrective measures are taken if necessary, and who will process the information received, generating statistics about the level of satisfaction as an indication of the foundation's performance.

The lesson learned is that the feedback received via a suggestion box is a more effective way of measuring user / client satisfaction than a survey is. However it is not enough to simply install such a box. Users / clients must also be encouraged to use it. Placing a form with a few questions as well as space fill in individual feedback near a suggestion box is also very effective.

Relations with national and local authorities:

EFE has generally maintained good working relationships and cooperation with national and local authorities on issues relating to the health and rights of LGBTI people. According to one of the authorities interviewed for this report, 'the Ecuadorian Foundation EQUIDAD has been a leader in the work on HIV within the civil society and continues to serve as the most important benchmark in that regard.'

An important lesson learned throughout EFE's 15-year existence concerns the importance of setting up mechanisms for communication and cooperation in order to maintain and strengthen institutional relationships (as described above) rather than be dependent on interpersonal relationships established with managers who may eventually leave those institutions.

EFE's good relationship with the Metropolitan District of Quito has allowed the foundation to lead and participate in HIV prevention programmes, in the construction of safe public spaces, in affirmative actions, in developing the municipal ordinances that protect people's rights, etc.

Meanwhile, its coordination of efforts with the Ministry of Public Health has enabled the development of such important tools as the 'Counselling Manual'. That coordination has also been important because the Ministry provides the confirmation tests and the free condoms that are used in EFE's prevention efforts.

Besides the further coordination with the Ministry of Public Health, the authorities interviewed also suggested new approaches to working with the Ecuadorian Social Security Institute (including the private health-insurance system), which is also involved in HIV prevention and treatments and could benefit from EFE's experience.

Managers of government programmes indicated that the most important work with sex workers and MSM is being done by civil society organisations (those two groups were mentioned specifically because the Ministry of Public Health expects them to be the most affected by the epidemic in this period). This is because the state has no specific commitment or specific strategies for these populations. In the case of detention centres that also contain MSM, there is little access to prevention measures. EFE identified those as places where potential challenges for intervention would occur.

THE WAY FORWARD:

The systematisation of this experience and the possibility of bringing forward new lessons have led to the identification of some improvement actions and some new challenges associated with this project:

Review the characterological tab and counselling process

The 'characterological tab' (intake form) and the Counselling Manual (among other procedures) should be updated on the basis of the experience of the EFE's staff since there is room for improvement in terms of their application. One option could be to apply a one counselling process for first-time visitors to the Testing Centre and another for users / clients who come on a regular basis.

Provide emotional support to both clients and staff of EFE

Those who provide HIV testing (APV) identified in interviews the need for support and tools to help them provide emotional support to clients who (have just heard that they are) HIV positive. The experience of the EFE staff shows that such clients are not always prepared to face a positive test result and certain other situations.

In addition to providing support to clients with the appropriate tools and skills, the EFE staff themselves also need to have room to process the emotions that arise from the more complex cases they face, in order to prevent them from being affected personally and to prevent the user / client from noticing that if it should happen.

Install a suggestion box and designate someone to review any feedback and take corrective measures if necessary

There is a plan to return to the idea of having a suggestion box to monitor user satisfaction. That will include forms with specific questions and a manager will be appointed for the periodic review of the content to ensure that corrective actions identified through this mechanism are taken into consideration.

Maintain and strengthen relations with public national and local bodies

As revealed in the interviews, it is important for the work of EFE to have many mechanisms of cooperation and coordination (in term of its relations with institutions,

independently of whichever officials are temporarily in charge). The focus on health within the LGBTI community involves both the national government and the municipal governments of mainly Quito and Guayaquil.

Find the best uses for the information and experience available to EFE

In terms of growth and productivity, EFE was identified as an organisation with great experience in working with MSM in the area of HIV prevention and diagnosis. Those who did so believe that all EFE's experience and information could be used further in to identify the possibility of more extensive research related to these fields. Universities with which EFE maintains positive relations could be allies in an initiative of this nature.

Final thoughts

The Ecuadorian Foundation EQUIDAD (EFE) has a 15-year history of working for the rights of the LGBTI community in Ecuador. Two of its most important areas of work have been the prevention of HIV and its specialised work with MSM. Its free testing service for HIV and STIs has become an important mechanism that is linked to prevention campaigns, advocacy, medical and psychological counselling. The implementation of the Testing Centre, the EFE staff, local and national authorities and the users of the services have all learned important lessons that are contained in this brief document, which may prove useful to activists and organisations engaged in similar activities.



Lessons Learned publications in this series:

36. Lessons learned at Equidad's HIV/STI testing centres for MSM in Ecuador
35. Raising awareness in the face of ignored deficiencies in the National Police Force of Panama
34. Safety for human rights advocates and defenders in the Central American context
33. Health Care Providers' sensitization and capacity development; and community mobilization through arts and theatre in Lusaka (Zambia)
32. Moving beyond individual counselling of LGBTI people to address central psychosocial issues on community level in Tshwane (Pretoria)
31. Bonela Challenging structural barriers through the Gender and Sexual Minority Rights Coalition in Gaborone (Botswana)
30. CEDEP Advocacy Approaches in Malawi
29. GALZ Lessons learnt amongst MSM in the uptake of Male Circumcision (Zimbabwe)
28. Uptake of Post-Exposure Prophylaxis (PEP) by Men who have Sex with Men in Tshwane (Pretoria).
27. OUT's Peer Education Programme for MSM / LGBT's in Tshwane, Pretoria
26. The Pink Ballot Agreement
25. Peer Education Programme (Malawi)
24. Schorer Monitor
23. Health, culture and network: Interventions with homosexuals living with HIV/AIDS at Rio de Janeiro polyclinics
22. Telling a story about sex, advocating for prevention activities – informational materials about safe sex and harm reduction for gay men and MSM from 14 to 24 years.
21. Mainstreaming of LGBTI/MSM/WSW issues in all areas of service provision: Empowering Service Providers and Policy Makers in Botswana through trainings
20. Now we are talking! – Developing skills and facing challenges.
19. Towards a Comprehensive Health Care Service Model for Transgender People in Ecuador
18. Comparative analysis and account of the outreach process to implement a method to change behaviors of youngsters with homo/lesbo erotic feelings in Costa Rica
17. Methodology for behavioral change in teenagers with same sex feelings, from the Greater Metropolitan Area, in Costa Rica
16. Breeding Ideas: building up a young peer educators' network.
15. Prevention Images: notes about a photography workshop with young MSM and people living with HIV/AIDS in Rio de Janeiro
14. Advocacy campaign to prohibit hate lyrics targeted at men having sex with men during a dance hall concert in Suriname.
13. Interactions between young multipliers and young gays and bisexuals in internal and external activities in Rio de Janeiro (Brazil).
12. Information Stands: Prevention Project aimed at young gay men from Tegucigalpa (Honduras)
11. Ndim'lo (This is me) Photovoice with lesbian and bisexual women in the Western Cape, South Africa
10. Me&3 Campaign for lesbian and gay individuals in Pretoria (South Africa)
9. Sensitization of the National Police by transgender organizations in Ecuador
8. Exercising 'Knowledges': Implementing training and prevention activities.
7. Public Incidence Activities: In search of public spaces accessible to teenagers with same sex feelings in the Greater Metropolitan area of Costa Rica. "Specific Case: Incidence with the National Institute for Women - INAMU - Costa Rica"
6. My body, your body, our sex: A Sexual Health Needs Assessment For Lesbians and Women Who Have Sex With Women, Durban, South Africa
5. Working with buddy groups in Zimbabwe
4. 'MAN TO MAN', a joint approach on sexual health of MSM in the Netherlands via the Internet
3. Lessons learned from project "Visual information on sexual health and the exercise of citizenship by the GLBTI beneficiaries of the Organization in Quito, Ecuador".
2. Coffee afternoons: Prevention Project aimed at young gay men from Tegucigalpa (Honduras)
1. Womyn2Womyn (W2W) quarterly open day, for lesbian and bisexual (LB) women at the Prism Lifestyle Centre in Hatfield, Pretoria (South Africa)

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