

The Growth of Pakachere: Local Partner Transitions to a USAID Direct Award with Technical Support from the LINKAGES and EpiC Projects in Malawi

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Box 1: LINKAGES and EpiC projects

Funded by USAID and PEPFAR, the global LINKAGES project led by FHI 360 has worked with more than 150 local partners worldwide to plan, deliver, and strengthen services to reduce HIV transmission among members of key populations and their partners and extend the lives of those already living with HIV. A key goal of LINKAGES is to empower local organizations, particularly those led by key populations, to address challenges within their own communities by strengthening their capacity to manage and implement programming important to the communities they serve.

EpiC is a five-year global project also funded by USAID and PEPFAR and led by FHI 360 that seeks to attain and maintain HIV epidemic control among key and priority populations through strategic technical assistance and direct service delivery. In partnership with governments, civil society organizations, and the private sector, EpiC works to break through barriers to achieving the UNAIDS 95-95-95 goals. It also promotes self-reliant management of national HIV programs by improving HIV case finding, prevention, and treatment programming.

Introduction

For Pakachere Institute for Health and Development Communication in Malawi, strategic growth under the mentorship of two projects funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) has been an opportunity to enhance organizational management skills and identify opportunities for growth, all to the benefit of key populations and local communities. Pakachere partnered with the first of these projects—the Linkages across the Continuum of HIV Services for Key Populations Affected by HIV (LINKAGES) project led by FHI 360—from 2015 through 2019. When LINKAGES subsequently transitioned to the FHI 360-led Meeting Targets and Maintaining Epidemic Control (EpiC) project, Pakachere and EpiC carried on the partnership (Box 1).

One objective of LINKAGES Malawi was to ensure high-quality programs for key populations by strengthening the technical capacity and organizational development of key-population-led community-based organizations (CBOs), as formal engagement of these CBOs is essential for the sustainability and local ownership of the Malawi HIV response. It was anticipated that over time, local partners might transition to direct awards from USAID—in other words, they would become a prime recipient and receive funding directly from USAID. This would be in keeping with the PEPFAR goal of providing 70 percent of funding to local partners by 2020 in order to achieve and maintain epidemic control. Similarly, one objective of EpiC is also to support the transition of prime funding awards to capable local partners.

Local Partner Pakachere

Pakachere (Box 2) held a subaward under LINKAGES Malawi to improve access to and uptake of HIV services among female sex workers. During the award period, LINKAGES provided technical support to Pakachere to develop tailored packages of communication materials to guide dialogues on HIV and reproductive health topics with female sex workers, increase the availability of and retention in HIV prevention and care services, and improve data collection for quality assurance,



FHI 360/LINKAGES Malawi staff, Blantyre District Health Office staff, and first group of Pakachere peer educators during peer educator training led by FHI 360/LINKAGES Malawi in Blantyre, Malawi

Photo credit: Pakachere IHDC

Box 2: Pakachere Institute of Health and Development Communication

Pakachere Institute of Health and Development Communication is one of the leading organizations in Malawi providing social and behavior change communication (SBCC) and HIV services. Established in April 2002, Pakachere has expanded its scope of work to provide clinical services to key populations and adolescent girls and young women (AGYW), while also continuing to design and implement SBCC interventions across a wide range of health and development issues, including nutrition, tuberculosis, gender, sexual and reproductive health, and HIV. The organization seeks to empower Malawians, particularly the vulnerable, to choose and sustain healthy behaviors through evidence-based.

program planning, and monitoring and evaluation (M&E). LINKAGES also assisted Pakachere to institute a culture of data use, among other assistance (Box 3). In 2017, Pakachere increased their coverage area from the two original districts, Blantyre and Mangochi, to two additional districts, Lilongwe and Mzuzu. By 2019, Pakachere was managing a total of seven drop-in centers—three in Mzuzu and four in Lilongwe.

Box 3: LINKAGES' monitoring and mentoring support to Pakachere

- Organizational capacity assessment (September 2015)
- Quarterly site monitoring visits to review performance
- Monthly subaward monitoring visits with contractual, technical, M&E, and financial reviews
- Internal audit reviews
- Organizational/financial support for asset verification and to ensure that processes aligned with best practices and met U.S. Government (USG) standards
- Mentoring on:
 - Reporting tools, cost allocations, and managing advance requests
 - Subaward development
 - Monitoring tools and templates
 - Peer outreach and clinical services
 - Review, interpretation, and alignment of service delivery to Ministry of Health guidelines and international best practices
 - Interpretation and use of data to help with timely reporting and improved program performance

Prepping for Growth

Pakachere benefited from participation in the multicountry LINKAGES project, particularly as FHI 360 had used this global platform to share innovations around HIV testing and treatment such as the enhanced peer outreach approach, risk-network referral, and microplanning.

In addition to HIV program innovations, the LINKAGES platform provided Pakachere with a model for program design. The examples of technical excellence and strong program design and management, coupled with Pakachere's zeal to learn, set the stage for future growth.

Early in 2019, USAID began discussions with FHI 360 and Pakachere regarding the possibility of a direct award from USAID. As part of these discussions, USAID requested that FHI 360 submit an analysis of Pakachere's current capacity to manage direct USG funding. This request was based on Pakachere's strong performance as an implementing partner under LINKAGES and its demonstrated ability to achieve service delivery targets, as well as its organizational systems, which were also strengthened under LINKAGES. Pakachere went through the non-US pre-award survey (NUPAS) with USAID and was assessed as having systems sufficiently strong enough to manage a direct award from USAID.

Pakachere's leadership was excited about the potential for a direct award from USAID, but they felt that to ensure success they would need LINKAGES/FHI 360 to mentor them in award management if they received a direct award. As a first step toward a direct award, Pakachere developed a draft proposal; this was easy for them to do given the lengthy relationship with LINKAGES and their understanding of the LINKAGES approaches and strategies. FHI 360 subsequently assisted Pakachere in the review and finalization process.

The proposal to USAID ultimately proved successful, and Pakachere was awarded funding for the period September 20, 2019–September 9, 2024 to implement the Local Endeavors for HIV/AIDS Prevention and Treatment (LEAP) activity. However, prior to issuing the direct award, USAID requested that EpiC Malawi, the project to which LINKAGES Malawi had just transitioned, continue mentoring Pakachere and jointly define areas where technical assistance was needed.



LINKAGES peer educator participating in 2018 World AIDS Day activities in Mzuzu, Malawi

Photo credit: Moses Msiska

Postaward Support

Thanks to its foundational experiences as a LINKAGES partner and its ongoing relationship with FHI 360 through EpiC, Pakachere was already in a good place to begin working with USAID. An initial step was for all three parties to contribute to the list of Pakachere's technical assistance needs. The result was a memorandum of understanding between Pakachere and FHI 360/EpiC in which the expectations for both organizations were defined. Pakachere and EpiC also developed a yearly work plan for technical assistance, complete with monthly, quarterly, semiannual, and annual milestones for both parties.

Areas of support identified for Year 1 (September 2019–September 2020) included:

- Routine support for data quality assurance, including equipping a local team to oversee this work and developing a schedule for data review
- Support to ensure financial and administrative compliance with the agreement, including addressing special award conditions
- Mentoring to support progress toward the second and third 95 goals, i.e., improving TX_CURR activities and viral monitoring platforms
- Monthly virtual technical program progress meetings to review performance against targets, identify gaps in project implementation, and discuss successful approaches for addressing gaps
- Mentoring of LEAP project leadership, including the chief of party, technical staff, and M&E managers, to clarify roles and responsibilities and respond to questions related to responsibilities
- Review of and feedback on program documentation, including quarterly and annual reports, abstracts, and publications
- Sharing and providing training on FHI 360 global innovations in key population programming
- Development and implementation of a web-based DHIS2 e-cascade application to ensure that clients are in the system and are followed across the cascade of services

FHI 360 has also provided mentoring and supervisory technical assistance through check-in meetings and monthly and quarterly virtual and/or in-person meetings, as well as ad hoc calls.

Growing Pains

Around the same time as the USAID award, news of Pakachere's strong reputation was spreading. Several other international and local organizations approached them with requests to partner on various proposals and projects. Despite the allure of these requests, however, Pakachere's leadership felt it was important to avoid unfettered expansion by being strategic about the organization's growth and deliberate about the new opportunities they took on—and not take on too much at once.

As Pakachere got into the everyday business of working with USAID, several challenges arose. An immediate one was the funder's requirement to rapidly develop a work plan (within 30 days). A second set of challenges concerned how to align the organization's key technical positions with the human resource structure of the project as stipulated by USAID and to clearly define the roles of the two key technical positions. A third challenge involved translating the contractual language from the award and emails into actionable steps compliant with regulations. For each of these challenges, Pakachere appreciated that they could call on the EpiC team—literally call them on the telephone—to troubleshoot issues and discuss questions.

Compliance with the requirements to submit complete documentation and reporting to USAID on tight deadlines was another area of adjustment. Prior to the direct award, Pakachere had been accustomed to submitting deliverables and data to FHI 360/LINKAGES, who then prepared the information for USAID. Taking the lead on planning for, developing, and ensuring timely submission of financial and programmatic reports proved to be a significant challenge. In response, EpiC Malawi staff provided mentoring on developing timelines, offered tips on reporting, and reviewed the deliverables to strengthen the quality of the reporting.



Pakachere has made firm and steady progress as a local partner thanks to the technical support from LINKAGES and EpiC. Areas that were identified for capacity building before graduation were addressed well, which allowed Pakachere to meet all of their first-year targets for all indicators. They submit good quarterly reports, propose new ways of doing business, and implement activities on the ground with fidelity.”

—USAID Malawi

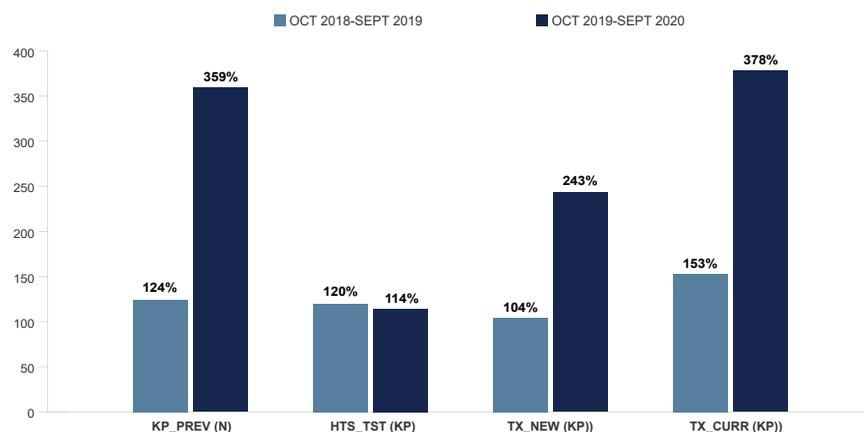
Grace Kumwenda, Pakachere's chief of party for the LEAP program, characterized the relationship between Pakachere and FHI 360 as privileging transparency, open communication, and mutual respect of each organizations' respective experience. She said, "The relationship we've had with FHI 360 has gone beyond just organizational. Having someone we can call and say, 'USAID is asking this... What do you think?' Just having resource people has been helpful for us."

In addition to FHI 360's assistance, USAID's agreement officer's representative (AOR) to Pakachere has also been instrumental in Pakachere's growth and success by advocating for the organization and being willing to talk with them about any issues that arise at any time.

Progress toward Targets

If their achievement of the yearly targets is any indication, Pakachere's performance is showing that they have been worth the investment. All targets for FY20 (October 2019–September 2020) were surpassed for the key monitoring, evaluation, and reporting (MER) indicators (Figure 1). This was the case even with the transition to a direct award, indicating that the transition has not had a negative impact on Pakachere's performance. Gaps which are areas of focus for FY21 programming include meeting the targets for viral load monitoring and ensuring consistent quality across service delivery sites, among other programming areas.

Figure 1. Achievement of selected MER targets (October 2018–September 2020)



A Word to the Wise

Pakachere has several words of advice for other local partners receiving funding from the USG for the first time:

- Avail the assistance of a more experienced organization that might serve as a resource to be contacted with questions at any point. Local partner leadership should be open to and engaged with the leadership of the resource organization, as well as respect their expertise and be responsive to their concerns.
- Become a learning organization and practice honesty and self-reflection about any gaps that may exist within your organization. This includes being open and flexible to learn, and viewing the process as an investment that requires substantial time and dedication.
- Be adaptable to the new way of doing business with a partner with high expectations such as the USG, including meeting all deadlines.
- Hire key technical staff with the right expertise and qualifications to ensure high performance, including a dedicated person responsible for compliance and contracts, which most local organizations do not have.

Future Directions

In FY21 (October 2020–September 2021), EpiC will continue to provide support to Pakachere as the organization continues to take on greater responsibilities and challenges. While the first year focused a great deal on organizational development, the second year will focus more on programmatic achievements. Areas of anticipated assistance include scale-up of pre-exposure prophylaxis services in Pakachere's drop-in centers, strengthening peer navigation, full integration and implementation of microplanning to enhance case detection, ensuring improved coverage for viral load testing, and conducting routine data quality assessments. Organizationally, Pakachere will also seek to issue subawards to other local partners, with EpiC supporting the development of a comprehensive and compliant subaward system.

The challenges of Pakachere's transition to a direct award have been many, but Pakachere leadership sees them as part and parcel of this new phase of growth in the organization's history. And, says Ms. Kumwenda, their ability to meet the challenges has depended on the strong partnership between FHI 360 and Pakachere and a willingness on both sides to put in the work in a spirit of excellence.

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