Welcome Message

The LINKAGES Nepal team extends a very warm welcome to Ms. Carrie Rasmussen, director, and Mr. Daniel Verschneider, deputy director, Health Development Office, USAID Nepal. We are excited to have them here with us in Nepal. We look forward to working with them, and our team will cooperate in the best way possible to make their work experience and stay in Nepal memorable and successful.

Farewell Message

With a heavy heart and very fond memories, our team bade farewell earlier this year to Ms. Shanda Steimer, director, and Mr. Daniel Sinclair, deputy director, Office of Health, USAID Nepal. We will be forever grateful for their contributions to improvements in Nepal's health sector. We cherish them and wish them continued success in their new roles.

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The LINKAGES Nepal Project’s Approaches and Interventions for Men who have Sex with Men, Male Sex Workers, and Transgender People

**Background:** Men who have sex with men (MSM), male sex workers (MSWs), and transgender people are disproportionately affected by HIV in Nepal. Together they account for 11 percent of the total estimated number of members of key populations (KPs) living with HIV in the country. HIV prevalence in this group is high compared to other KP groups; it is 6.2 percent among MSM, MSWs, and transgender people in Kathmandu Valley (2017) and 8.2, 11.8, and 8.1 percent among MSM, MSWs, and transgender people, respectively, in Terai highway districts (2016). These statistics indicate the need to identify people who have HIV early, enroll them in treatment without delay, and ensure close follow-up for this community to achieve the country’s ambitious 90-90-90 targets by 2020. MSM, MSWs, and transgender people, therefore, remain the focus of the National HIV Strategic Plan (NHSP) 2016-2021 and the LINKAGES Nepal project.

**Approaches and Interventions**

LINKAGES Nepal provides the continuum of HIV prevention, treatment, and care services to MSM, MSWs, and transgender people in a manner that is friendly and sensitive to these KP groups.

**Prevention Education and Demand Generation**

Under LINKAGES Nepal, community-based supporters (CBSs) assisted by peer mobilizers (PMs) conduct outreach activities for prevention education and referral among MSM, MSWs, and transgender people. The approaches they use are outlined below.

**One-on-one and group educational sessions:** LINKAGES Nepal trains and mobilizes CBSs from the KP community to identify and reach MSM, MSWs, and transgender people for HIV prevention education and referral. They use a variety of interactive strategic behavioral communication (SBC) materials for risk assessment and provide risk-reduction education through one-on-one and group educational sessions. CBSs also refer KP members for HIV testing and sexually transmitted infection (STI) check-up services, as well as providing condoms and lubricants.

**Use of information and communication technologies:** LINKAGES Nepal implements interactive voice response (IVR) technology integrated with existing web-based short message service (web-SMS) to disseminate HIV and STI prevention messages; to promote HIV testing, adherence, and retention; and to share testimonials from members of KPs living with HIV including MSM, MSWs, and transgender people. LINKAGES Nepal also utilizes online platforms such as Facebook to reach new KP members and refer them for testing. Considering the growing use and popularity of these platforms, LINKAGES Nepal aims to introduce, integrate, and extend HIV prevention education through them, especially targeted for hard-to-reach MSM, MSWs, and transgender people.

**Enhanced peer outreach:** LINKAGES Nepal uses an enhanced peer outreach approach to identify, reach, and motivate KP members who may be hidden and encourage them to access HIV testing and STI screening services. Spouse/partner testing of HIV-positive MSM, MSWs, and transgender people is one of the strategies used to increase HIV yield.

**Edutainment activities:** In May 2017, LINKAGES Nepal began a series of edutainment activities such as movie/video screenings and make-up events in the waiting rooms of implementing partner agencies (IAs). Peer champions are mobilized at these events, and participants are encouraged to get tested. The objectives are to engage, orient, and motivate MSM, MSWs, and transgender people on the importance of HIV testing, to boost self-esteem, reduce self-stigma, and bring them closer to the available services.

**Service Provision**

To increase the availability of the continuum of prevention, care, and treatment services for MSM, MSWs, and transgender people, LINKAGES Nepal through its partners runs mobile and static clinics for providing HIV testing services. The static clinics also provide STI management services to KPs. The prevention and clinical staff regularly follow up with KP members to retain them in services and provide facilitated referral for care and treatment for those who are HIV positive. CBSs regularly follow up with MSM, MSWs, and transgender people who are living with HIV to provide information on positive prevention, and treatment adherence and retention.

**Enabling Environment:** LINKAGES Nepal, in coordination with the Federation of Sexual and Gender Minorities in Nepal (FSGMN), has provided orientation sessions to clinical staffs to provide MSM- and MSW-friendly and sensitive and transgender-competent services. LINKAGES Nepal and FSGMN provide continuous on-site coaching and supportive supervision to the IAs to identify barriers and to reduce the gap in HIV prevention, testing, treatment, and care services among MSM, MSWs, and transgender people. LINKAGES Nepal also provides training on stigma and discrimination reduction to community leaders and health care service providers. Further, LINKAGES Nepal has also developed MSM- and MSW-friendly, sensitive, and gender-affirming clinical guidelines, a demand generation strategy, and non-heteronormative SBC materials to address the specific needs and issues of MSM, MSWs, and transgender people in Nepal.

LINKAGES Nepal supports and collaborates with FSGMN and its community-based organizations (CBOs) to mark International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia (IDAHOT), lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) pride month during June, and Gai Jatra festival to sensitize the general public about MSM, MSWs, and transgender people.

CBSs provide basic information on gender-based violence (GBV) prevention and refer those who may need assistance to available service providers as appropriate. LINKAGES Nepal-supported clinics also provide post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) to staff in case of occupational exposure and to beneficiaries in case of sexual assault.

**Between October 2016 and June 2017, LINKAGES Nepal served 9,550 MSM, 2,091 MSWs, and 1,581 transgender people through HIV prevention outreach; and tested 4,825 MSM, 1,202 MSWs, and 1,008 transgender people for HIV. A total of 27 MSM, MSWs, and transgender people are enrolled in antiretroviral therapy (ART).**

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### LINKAGES NEPAL PROJECT ACHIEVEMENTS
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**Apr-Jun 2017**

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>FSWs</th>
<th>CLIENTs OF FSWs</th>
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<th>MSWs</th>
<th>TG PEOPLE</th>
<th>OTHERS</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>HIV-POSITIVE PEOPLE RECEIVING CARE AND SUPPORT IN COMMUNITY</strong></td>
<td>82</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>19</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>SCREENED FOR SEXUALLY TRANSMITTED INFECTIONS (STIs)</strong></td>
<td>3,560</td>
<td>2,683</td>
<td>348</td>
<td>152</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>327</td>
<td>7,135</td>
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</table>

**TOTAL 1,101 PEOPLE RECEIVED STIGMA AND DISCRIMINATION REDUCTION TRAINING**
- 535 MALE
- 515 FEMALE
- 51 TG PEOPLE
Ms. Simran Sherchan, 34, is the national program coordinator at FSGMN for LINKAGES Nepal. FSGMN is a national network of the LGBTI community in Nepal. She provides administrative and programmatic support to IAs that work with MSM, MSWs, and transgender people in five districts. Ms. Sherchan is currently pursuing a bachelor’s degree in social work. Since 2011, she has been involved in national-level policy and advocacy for the rights and well-being of the LGBTI community in Nepal. She worked as a peer educator in Blue Diamond Society (BDS), Kathmandu, from 2011 to 2013. Ms. Sherchan received the “Red Ribbon” award in 2012 in the “Beauty and Brain Contest” for transgender people during Miss Pink 2012 competition, organized by BDS.

“I envision LGBTI people living their lives with dignity and self-respect without facing stigma and discrimination.”

She thinks the major issues faced by the LGBTI community are social stigma, family unacceptance, and ineffective implementation of legal rights and provisions for LGBTI people. LGBTI communities also experience physical and verbal abuse from some individuals due to their gender identity and sexual orientation. Increased awareness on sexual orientation and gender identity is needed. Moreover, most members of the LGBTI community need to be empowered economically. To address these issues, FSGMN plays a crucial role for advocacy and linkages.

She is happy to be part of the LINKAGES Nepal project, contributing to the 90-90-90 targets. She has been working with the LGBTI community for more than six years, helping raise awareness for the physical, mental, and social well-being of LGBTI people. In addition to HIV prevention, she is helping raise awareness on human rights, care and support for HIV-positive transgender people, and sensitization in the community (including schools and colleges).

On being a leader in the LGBTI community, she says: “I feel proud to speak in front of people and disclose my identity. I am proud of who I am, and when I inspire others to disclose their identity, I feel a sense of achievement. I would like to be an inspiration to more people for disclosing their identity.” She suggests that LGBTI people should understand and accept their identity and not hide it due to fear of society. It is not possible to live life with a dual identity, and they should be concerned about their physical and mental health and social safety.

Ms. Raju Thakali (Fufu), 52, has been project coordinator of Naulo Bihani Pokhara (NBP), a CBO of FSGMN working in Kaski district, since 2016. She holds a bachelor’s degree in the humanities. Her previous positions include school teacher, drop-in center (DIC) operator in BDS-Pokhara, and project coordinator for the DFID/UNDP-funded HIV prevention program. She has served the LGBTI community for more than 10 years and is founding director of NBP, established in 2006. Ms. Thakali has received several acknowledgments for her contributions in the field of LGBTI—Social Concern Group, Pokhara (2007); Sampadakala Mandir (2008); Friends to Reduce Poor and Poverty Nepal (2008); and Nepal Red Cross Society, Kaski district (2016).

She says that issues faced by LGBTI people include self-stigma, discrimination, suicidal tendency, and police raids that affect transgender women. “The initial situation of the LGBTI community was not easy. The issue was that the LGBTI community was different and was against the existing social norms and values. It was difficult to raise our voices in front of the government,” she says.

Since its establishment, NBP has done significant work in the field of HIV including raising awareness; identifying HIV-positive MSM, MSWs, and transgender people; advocating for LGBTI rights; and sensitizing the public on related issues. Most noteworthy are the third-gender beauty contest in 2007 and a skills development training for LGBTI people in 2016 in coordination with the District Development Committee (DDC). In 2017, NBP received a budget of NRs 150,000 from DDC to provide driver training to 10 LGBTI people.

She says that self-stigma, which causes members of the LGBTI community to hide their identity, prevails but that the situation is gradually improving. Society and the nation’s perception of LGBTI people is changing. Government has also ensured the rights of sexual and gender minorities, which, she says, means they can now disclose their identity without fear and hesitation.

Ms. Thakali says that working for the LGBTI community makes her proud. “I have struggled a lot toward improving the social and legal environment for LGBTI people. Positive response and change from the society and the nation gives me self-satisfaction and encouragement.”

Her message to the LGBTI community is that they should have the desire and motivation to contribute to the betterment of their community. They should be aware of the legal provisions of the government and utilize them. She says that the efforts of the USAID-funded Saath-Saath project have helped KPs, especially transgender people, to identify GBV, take precautionary measures, and take necessary actions if experienced.

In her opinion, LINKAGES Nepal’s mobile clinic has contributed tremendously to uptake of HIV testing services among MSM, MSWs, and transgender people as they have hesitated to visit a static clinic due to the fear of being disclosed.
Mr. Dev Narayan Shrestha, 50, is the project coordinator of Human Conscious Society (HCS), a CBO affiliated with FSGMN in Chitwan district. HCS is one of the IAs of LINKAGES Nepal. He has completed the intermediate level in commerce and has been working at HCS since 2007. Mr. Shrestha believes that being able to implement the knowledge gained through training and various programs to improve the life of LGBTI people is his greatest achievement. He envisions a society where members of the LGBTI community can disclose their identity without fear.

He feels that the life of LGBTI people is full of challenges. These include stigma, discrimination, isolation from family and society, the public's lack of awareness, and the government's failure to address LGBTI issues. He says that physical and verbal abuse are less compared to the past due to increased awareness, but it has not stopped completely.

He has been working on LGBTI issues for 10 years and appreciates that LINKAGES Nepal provides the continuum of HIV prevention, treatment, care, and support services for MSM, MSWs, and transgender people. He has helped raise awareness about HIV, STIs, and human rights issues for LGBTI people in schools and colleges; identified HIV-positive LGBTI people and supported them to enroll in care and treatment; and distributed condoms and lubricants. He expresses concern about the sustainability of these efforts, proposes the need to design programs to reach more LGBTI people, and encourages them to reveal their identity in society.

Mr. Shrestha thinks that various programs for LGBTI people have helped to create an enabling environment for them, and their situation is improving.

“Firstly, change in society’s perception is important because the fear of social isolation is the main reason for LGBTI people to conceal their identity. Secondly, LGBTI people should also be aware that concealing their identity would make the situation worse rather than better,” says Mr. Shrestha.

Mr. Raju Lama, 34, works as a project coordinator for Sudur Paschim Samaj (SPS), a CBO of FSGMN, and one of the IAs of LINKAGES Nepal working in Kailali district. He is pursuing a bachelor’s degree in sociology and rural development. He has been working in BDS since 2005 and has been vice-president of FSGMN since 2015.

He is a member of the LGBTI community and says that being able to disclose his identity to his family is his greatest achievement. “I revealed my sexual orientation to my family in 2009. My family has accepted me the way I am. They love me and support me. But everyone is not as lucky as me,” he says.

He envisions that LGBTI people are socially accepted and treated equally. He shares that advocacy for and by the LGBTI community has helped to introduce laws and policies for LGBTI community, which has helped minimize the violence they face to some extent. However, he says that the life of LGBTI people is not easy and some of the challenges they face are societal stigma and discrimination, self-stigma, forced marriage, concealing their identity due to fear of social boycott, and weak implementation of laws and policies addressing LGBTI issues.

His contributions during more than 12 years he has served the LGBTI community are commendable. He has been involved in advocacy for citizenship and passport for third gender, awareness campaigns, and media campaigns. He has also been involved in raising awareness among LGBTI people about legal and social issues.

He believes that strengthening legal provisions and rights for LGBTI people can reduce self-stigma and increase societal and family acceptance. Some LGBTI people have low educational status due to dropping out early from school or college. Capacity development and livelihood opportunities are needed to empower them economically.

“Working for LGBTI people is very difficult. LGBTI people are hidden and hard to reach. A lot of effort is needed to make them understand the importance to accept their personality and reveal their identity,” says Mr. Lama. He says that the IVR and webSMS services of LINKAGES Nepal has made it easier to raise awareness on HIV and STIs among MSM, MSWs, and transgender people.

His message for other LGBTI people: they should be strong and courageous and should not fear to disclose their identity.
Hanif is a transgender woman practicing sex work. Rajendra Dhobi (Rajani), a CBS of LINKAGES Nepal, found out about Hanif’s risk behaviors and that she was undergoing treatment for tuberculosis. Hence, Rajani reached her through HIV prevention outreach in November 2016 and encouraged her to get tested for HIV. However, it was only in December 2016, after regular follow-ups, that she visited Western Star Nepal (WSN), a LINKAGES Nepal-supported clinic, to get tested for HIV. She tested positive. “Finding out her HIV-positive status, she trembled; she was nervous and expressed that she wanted to commit suicide,” shared Rajani. Rajani consoled, counseled, and accompanied her to the government-run ART center at the Bheri Zonal Hospital in Banke district. Rajani helped Hanif enroll in treatment and after spending three days at the community care center run by Association of Helping Hand, she returned home.

“I take medicine regularly, and Rajani visits me to provide further information about healthy living and safe behaviors. When I look back, I had multiple partners, and I was not using condoms. Even when Rajani initially reached me with HIV- and STI-related information, I was not bothered. I feel sad about my careless behaviors. Now, I am thankful to Rajani for reaching me with HIV- and STI-related information, motivating me to get tested, and helping me to be on treatment,” said Hanif.

Success Story: Mobilizing Key Population Community Members to Ensure Uptake of HIV-related Services

According to Hanif, she now practices safe behaviors. She is married and has four children. “We also encouraged her spouse and all her partners to get tested for HIV. Her spouse tested HIV negative. However, one of her partners is HIV positive. We are following up with her partner to enroll him on ART and counseling Hanif to help her spouse and other partners to stay HIV negative,” said Rajani.

LINKAGES Nepal is implementing HIV prevention, treatment, care, and support services in Banke district for MSM, MSWs, and transgender people through WSN, a local nongovernmental organization. Rajani is also from the same community and is a transgender woman. Likewise, the majority of WSN staff members are from the same community. This approach also helps the project to identify and reach KPs with HIV- and STI-related information and services. Furthermore, LINKAGES Nepal provides orientations to outreach staff and health care workers to ensure that the services are KP-friendly. KP members have shared that when individuals from their own community approach them, they feel comfortable to share information about their gender identity, sexual orientation, and risk behaviors, and to participate in HIV-related services.

World Health Day 2017

On April 7, LINKAGES Nepal collaborated with Ncell, a private telecommunications company, to promote HIV-related messages. As per Ncell, approximately 321,802 individuals were exposed to the message and 8,197 dials were made to learn more about HIV.

International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia 2017

On May 17, LINKAGES Nepal commemorated IDAHOT 2017 in Banke, Chitwan, Kailali, Kaski, Kathmandu, and Lalitpur districts with the leadership of national network partner FSGMN to show solidarity for the cause. Events included interaction on LGBTI-related issues; a candlelight program in memory of those LGBTI individuals who lost their lives to HIV/AIDS; river bank cleaning; and a sensitization and orientation program for partners of MSM, staff of Shukraaj Tropical and Infectious Disease Hospital (STIDH), and Paropakar Maternity and Women’s Hospital, Kathmandu. LINKAGES Nepal also participated in the UN Cares event.

International AIDS Candlelight Memorial Day 2017

On May 21, LINKAGES Nepal IAs participated in various events organized by stakeholders of the national HIV response to mark the memorial day with the theme Ending AIDS Together.

LGBTI Pride Month 2017

In June, LINKAGES Nepal celebrated LGBTI Pride Month in coordination with FSGMN. LINKAGES Nepal organized a knowledge-sharing session on the diverse sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) issues in Nepal. Representatives from FSGMN shared their experiences as members of the LGBTI community in Nepal. In addition, LINKAGES Nepal hoisted a rainbow flag in the office during the month to showcase FHI 360 Nepal’s solidarity toward the LGBTI community. Through FSGMN, LINKAGES Nepal also supported the first sexual and gender minorities national dance competition organized by BDS and Cruse Aids. CBOs of FSGMN from across the country participated.
Data Quality Assessment of Implementing Partner Agencies

LINKAGES Nepal conducted data quality assessment (DQA) of 24 IAs for the period October 2016 to March 2017. The existing system for routine data recording and reporting was reviewed; validity, reliability, system integrity, and accuracy of routine data recorded and reported were assessed using standard DQA tools; and recommendations were provided to improve systems for good quality data. The overall DQA score of 24 IAs was 92.7 percent. Steps for improvement were developed with IAs that scored below 100 percent.

Initiation of Interactive Voice Response Services

LINKAGES Nepal initiated IVR service in April. It disseminates information on HIV and STI prevention, promotes HIV testing, emphasizes adherence and retention on treatment, and shares testimonials from KP members and people living with HIV (PLHIV) to promote health-seeking behavior. This system is integrated with existing web-SMS services. IVR service is also beneficial for KP members who cannot read and write.

Orientation on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Intersex

In May 2017, Mr. Brett Tolman, gender and social inclusion advisor, USAID Washington, provided an orientation to LINKAGES Nepal IAs staff on LGBTI programming. Mr. Tolman used the genderbread person to highlight the diversity of sexual orientation, gender expression, and gender identity. Furthermore, LINKAGES Nepal’s approaches to reaching LGBTI people (particularly MSM, MSWs, and transgender people) for HIV testing, STI screening, and treatment services were also discussed.

Support to NCASC to Organize Workshop to Design and Finalize mHealth Messages

LINKAGES Nepal provided technical and financial support to the NCASC to organize a workshop to design mHealth messages to enhance ART retention and adherence among PLHIV in Nepal. NCASC will send the messages through its app to PLHIV who are on ART from ART sites. The 23 attendees included participants from NCSAC, LINKAGES Nepal, and national HIV network partners National Association of People Living with HIV and AIDS in Nepal (NAP+N) and National Federation of Women Living with HIV and AIDS (NFWLHA). The workshop finalized message content for different segments of the key audience and frequency of messages.

Continuing Medical Education in Government Antiretroviral Therapy Centers

LINKAGES Nepal organized a continuing medical education (CME) session on recommendations of the National HIV Testing and Treatment Guidelines, 2017 in five government ART centers – Bheri Zonal Hospital, Kapilbastu District Hospital, Makawanpur District Hospital, Rapti Sub-Regional Hospital, and Seti Zonal Hospital. Altogether, 200 health care workers, including doctors and nurses, participated.

Participation in International Workshops and Meetings

LINKAGES Nepal participated in the Global Strategic Information (SI)/M&E workshop organized by FHI 360 SI/M&E in May in Bangkok, Thailand; Connecting Asia: A Regional Consultation on Information Communication and Technologies (ICT), HIV, MSM, and Getting to the 90-90-90 Targets held in Bangkok in June, and LINKAGES Rising! Country Leaders Meeting in Washington, D.C., USA, in June.
Training on HIV Cascade Analysis and Use

In May, LINKAGES Nepal conducted training on HIV cascade analysis and use for 33 monitoring and evaluation (M&E) staff and project coordinators from IAs in Kathmandu. Topics included the national HIV epidemic scenario and response, how to explain the basic concept of the CoPCT cascade, and how to prepare the cascade for further analysis and use.

Visitors Log

USAID Nepal Team

Ms. Ivana Lohar, team leader, family planning (FP), HIV, and social marketing; Ms. Nipurama Rai, development program assistant; and Mr. Gajendra Rai, FP compliance officer visited and monitored LINKAGES Nepal activities in Chitwan, Makawanpur, and Nawalparasi districts. LINKAGES Nepal's approaches, result areas, and progress using the CoPCT cascade framework in the districts were discussed. The USAID Nepal team interacted with key staff regarding achievements, particularly the number of KP members reached, gaps between the number of people diagnosed with HIV versus in community care, and gaps in treatment. They also observed outreach sessions and clinical services, monitored inventory procured, and facilitated the inventory handover process.

National Consultant

Dr. Sarala Malla, national consultant, Global Fund/Save the Children International under leadership of National Public Health Laboratory (NPHL), visited LINKAGES Nepal IAs in Kaski and Sunsari districts to assess the laboratory process of HIV programs. The consultant interacted with staff about the procedure and current situation of the HIV and STI cases, and observed laboratory set-up, services, and processes.

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