

CULTURAL CREATIVITY IN HIV/AIDS SOCIAL PREVENTION IN CUBA  
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Lic. Nereida Rojo Pérez,\* Lic. Yisel Torres Rojo,\*\* Lic. Francisca Gómez Hernández,\*\*\* Lic. Norma Rita Guillard Limonta\*\*\*\*

\* Sociologist, Doctor in Health Science, Master in Public Health and Educational Technology, full professor and consultant and group researcher (National Public Health School).

\*\* Master of Education, Master in Health Promotion and Education, assistant professor and group researcher (Pedro Kouri Tropical Medicine Institute).

\*\*\* Nurse, Master in Population Health, professor (Academic Division of Health Science) (Juarez Autonomous University of Tabasco).

\*\*\*\* Psychologist, Executive Secretary (Cuban Society of Psychology), and Chairman (Gender, Identity and Diversity in Social Communication Section).

[nereida.rojo@infomed.sld.cu](mailto:nereida.rojo@infomed.sld.cu)  
[guillardlimonta@yahoo.com](mailto:guillardlimonta@yahoo.com)

[yisel@ipk.sld.cu](mailto:yisel@ipk.sld.cu)

[fran\\_gom1980@hotmail.com](mailto:fran_gom1980@hotmail.com)

Cultural creativity projects for the prevention of aids arose in the wake of the spread of hiv and the need to join efforts to counter the effects of the epidemic by mobilizing the objective and subjective resources of the population that identify and links it to the environment. In practice, they are well spread and are thought to have had a positive influence on local management policies at the promotion and prevention level, in developing social involvement, the implementation of a gender approach and in reducing stigma and discrimination and increasing sexual diversity acknowledgement. This paper analyzes the theoretical bases of these projects and presents the findings of an evaluation of sociocultural projects for hiv prevention in the country implemented under the ministries of public health and culture, using a qualitative methodology. The techniques used include localization and review of documents, interviews to specialists and key informants, group discussions, and observation of actions implemented under these projects in selected provinces. In general, findings suggest that though there are different levels of project development and artistic maturity we can find a set of good practices and lessons learned that should contribute to their improvement and generalization in communities for preventing hiv and other diseases and enhancing cooperation among members of the community and responsibility for the health of others and their own.

Key words: sociocultural approach, sociocultural approach and hiv, hiv prevention projects, good practices in hiv prevention, cultural and health projects, culture and health

Why this wonderful scientific technology that saves efforts  
and makes our lives easier, contributes so little?

Simply because we have not learned to use it with good sense ...  
nor have we learned to share it or put it  
at the service of those who need it most.

MIRTA ROSES, at the World Ministerial Summit on Health Research,  
Mexico City, 2004

## INTRODUCTION

Cultural creativity projects for HIV/AIDS prevention are a set of actions in the field of education, sexual health promotion, and disease prevention in which the cultural universe of the different social stakeholders involved is taken as a reference. In practical terms, they are viable alternatives to adapt information, education, and communication activities on HIV/AIDS to the mentalities, beliefs and value systems of the population for the purpose of developing behavioral patterns based on awareness and responsibility in terms of health (1).

They also allow to design interventions that contribute to the development of inclusive policies and strategies at the national and local levels, with the involvement of the social stakeholders concerned. Modifying the behavior of human beings in a sustainable manner is one of the biggest challenges for those who advocate for a long life for the human species and which entails a display of talents, resources and will that could in fact lead to effective actions for the desired change.

Cultural activity projects are a means for such purpose as they set capabilities in motion on the basis of life experiences and the diverse identities of the stakeholders involved.

In its sociological aspect, they represent that popular imagery that enable social groups to restructure material and spiritual daily life experiences to build their own spaces from an objective and subjective point of view. These are social spaces that have expanded during the last twenty years as a response of the population to the global spread of HIV and its consequences.

Experts and international agencies agree in highlighting the novelty of the sociocultural approach in the prevention of AIDS, its flexibility and potential results through its articulation with national or local policies of a transdisciplinary and crosscutting nature, even when there is scarce evidence of its effectiveness (2).

Other challenges and dilemmas stem from the concept of culture itself and the theoretical, methodological, epistemological, and ethic problems associated with its functionality as a combination of the symbolic and material aspects of each people and the different vulnerabilities of groups and individuals vis-à-vis the biological, social, economic, and cultural context of HIV.

With HIV prevention projects from a cultural perspective, we try to innovate and develop new qualities by finding answers for those who are skeptical about such change, prevent banality and, above all, provide creators and managers with the tools for a more objective introspective analysis to obtain information for decision-making—an inward look.

In Cuba, where the epidemic has been successfully addressed, it has been established that intellectually well-understood messages do not achieve the required level of assimilation or the expected behavioral change in the most vulnerable populations. Therefore, in the search for new answers, communities have generated a set of cultural projects for the prevention of HIV based on the most autochthonous artistic expressions of each territory, together with other local development strategies. The cultural approach has had two main courses of action:

- a) Identify the cultural, anthropological, and sociological foundations that prevent the exercise of safe and protected sex.
- b) Understand cultural fundamentals to use them in the design of actions allowing changes in sensitive areas such as HIV/AIDS prevention policies and programs, essential care, and the attitudes towards (and of) persons who have been infected or have developed the disease.

#### BACKGROUND OF THE CULTURAL APPROACH FOR HIV PREVENTION

In Cuba, different actions to develop a sociocultural approach in prevention have been pursued by the National Center for STI-HIV/AIDS Prevention of the Ministry of Public Health with the help of UNESCO, aimed mainly to most vulnerable groups to

the epidemic. The wide spread of HIV/AIDS since its outbreak and its inherent biosocial complexity made joint efforts of different social stakeholders working in prevention at the international, national and local levels essential to counter the negative effects of the epidemic on the individual, the family, and the society.

The interdisciplinary nature of this approach has proven valid in influencing the different segments of the population according to their risk potentials and, particularly, by evaluating the cultural, economic and social characteristics that identify them, in such a way that it allows the design of adequate educational and prevention strategies demanded by each context, circumstance and population.

The most effective national responses are those that adapt to the specific needs of a country, taking into consideration the concrete situations that make people vulnerable to HIV and its effects and make best use of the strengths of the population and institutions dealing with the issue. Therefore, in terms of prevention, high importance is placed on adopting a sociocultural approach and using the cultural resources of a population (life-styles, value systems, traditions, beliefs, and fundamental human rights) as key references for the implementation of project and program actions.

Prevention work involves promoters, mostly volunteers, who are part of the different groups, with their patterns, social norms, traditions and customs, and train themselves as agents of change to mobilize the cultural resources of the community.

The essence of the above-mentioned assumptions has guided creators, cultural specialists, health workers and other experts working in this field with many possibilities for action. Since 1998, with the emergence of the joint UNESCO/UNAIDS project "A cultural approach to HIV/AIDS prevention and care," these concepts became part of the daily work of specialists and creators in support of reflections and actions aimed at understanding, promoting and activating the presence of cultural factors in fighting the pandemic. Prevention education and the search for incentives to change risk behaviors of the population, as well as the negative perception of the disease and the stigmatization of persons living with HIV/AIDS and their families are indisputable elements of this battle.

In order to implement this joint project, Cuba carried out a study in 1999 on the topic (3), coordinated by the National Center on STI-HIV/AIDS together with UNESCO. Similar studies were carried out in several countries in three regions: sub-Saharan Africa, Asia Pacific, and the Caribbean (4).

The findings of research studies were published following discussions in different regional workshops held between April and June 1999, where the significance of experiences was validated and guidelines were set to support prevention actions by applying a cultural approach in strategies, policies, projects, and fieldwork.

Of particular importance was the National Monitoring and Evaluation Workshop held in Havana on July 2006, where once again creators and experts expressed favorable views on the decisive role of culture and its implications in the actions of the population to fight HIV/AIDS on the basis of their own references. The event also approved the publication of the methodological guide HIV/AIDS: A response from a cultural approach and promoted the drawing up of a national inventory to record the initiatives of sociocultural projects related to the objectives endorsed by the cultural approach (5).

UNESCO's definition of culture identifies the fact that the health-disease process and the social responses to its manifestation are concepts related to each culture, in terms of a system that socially conditions and models the behaviors and performances of population groups (6).

Behaviors and conducts favoring transmission of the virus are determined by a social context marked by poverty, migration, drug-addiction, lurid life-styles, family

disintegration, and the resulting loss of values. This has made the HIV/AIDS pandemic, as a public health and sustainable social development crisis, as a human drama and a medical-social problem, demand from stakeholders a more creative intervention, reconsidering the concepts and importance of cultural factors in the quest for answers to stop the spread of the epidemic (7).

#### CHARACTERISTICS OF CULTURAL CREATIVITY PROJECTS IN HIV PREVENTION

The most genuine attribute of HIV prevention projects from a cultural perspective is that "art or cultural act" understood in its broadest sense, as the means used to link the goal of the educational and prevention action with the cognitive subject. In accordance with the goal, they can be aimed at sensitizing, informing, reflecting or increasing risk perception in the general population (8).

These are projects aimed at active persons, capable of analyzing and synthesizing, who are permanently in touch with their environment. This allows a flow of ideas that, together with their life experiences, fosters human development.

In general terms, the design of a project should respond to a sensed need and to a rational organization defined by an analysis of the reality for the design of a creative proposal, based on the views of the stakeholders and the characteristics and potentials of the local culture. It should have inputs and resources from governmental or nongovernmental, public or private, national or local, and civil society sources.

Sociocultural projects for HIV prevention are committed to bringing about—in the context of a wider multi-sectorial response—changes in the knowledge, attitudes, perceptions, beliefs, and life-styles of the population to reduce the number of new infections, treat sexual minorities, carriers and those suffering from AIDS with dignity, and show solidarity towards those affected.

In this regard, the main objective of these projects is to trigger the development of critical thinking requiring group learning methods in which both creative and ludic experiences include different educational levels and degrees to foster exchanges. As Freire states:

... stems from a critical matrix and generates criticism ... as ... both extremes in a dialogue join through love, hope, faith in one another, and criticism then stems from a common search for something ... Communication is only possible through dialogue [9].

Therefore, this cultural proposal is included in the so-called popular education, which entails the transformation pedagogy by putting into practice the deconstruction and reconstruction of knowledges.

Popular education as an educational technique includes in its methodological and epistemological fundamentals the concept that everydayness is an important and unique part of the learning process. Through it, prejudices, attitudes, and values that collapse under the undeniable truth of the other together with us—the other that shares, cooperates, discusses, and above all becomes the accessible example of the distorted image we have of those who are different due to profession, occupation, belief, political affiliation or sexual preference—are reconsidered (10).

Frequently, education in this type of project is done through promoters, volunteers of the community itself with the advice or assistance of experts as well as professional artists or amateurs—sometimes from the group itself—who share common needs, feelings and problems but tend to be unstable.

This exchange of information, emotions, and values among members of the group fosters participation and communication, understood as the emission-reception of messages between interlocutors in a state of full reciprocity.

In summary, we are talking about the establishment of a system of knowledge that will enrich the collective memory and culture of the different social groups, modify their view of the world, and foster its transformation. It is a matter of identifying those cultural resources that improve the quality of life and intellectual development of the people to expand their health dimensions and reduce those of the illness, particularly in the field of sexual and reproductive health and its current main obstacle—the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

#### THE ROLE OF CULTURE IN PROJECTS

In cultural creativity projects for HIV prevention, art is a decisive factor in the communication and participatory process due to its ability to re-create the world allowing others to meditate and enjoy through the point of view of the creator, expressed in the artistic work. Nonetheless, culture, understood in its broadest sense and not limited to the artistic field, is the most permanent and comprehensive dimension because it is where social subjectivity and symbolic, psychological, ideological and material production are articulated, and the vital meanings of social developments are shaped.

Preservation of the tradition and the generation of possibilities for innovation and finding original actions, which are not part of the traditional actions of groups, converge in the cultural dimension. It also expresses respect for plurality, effective acknowledgement of the right of all people to preserve their identity, acceptance of all cultures in their different manifestations, and understanding of diversity as a source of wealth.

As Vigotsky argues, culture creates special forms of conduct and changes the type of activity of the psychic functions in accordance with the process of historical development (11). Thus, the objective of cultural creativity projects for HIV prevention is to promote learning for a healthy life based on multiplicity, strengthening the identity, developing aesthetic sensitivity and self-esteem, conceiving the spectator as an actor and collectively visualizing situations of exclusion with the purpose of improving the human being, its conditions, and collective creativity.

In this regard, one can speak about the creation of community cultural spaces for a full reflexive and creative participation of the social actors in these self-managing processes in two directions: the creation of the space itself, and the development and application of capacities and competences.

Placing emphasis on the experiences is vital for the development of people and for the integrality of any transforming process, which in turn requires a facilitator for social participation and mobilization.

When you promote creativity, poetry, humor, and local cultural elements, you can mobilize enormous energies because the pleasure of communication overcomes the cold logic of everydayness. An event, an action, a song, a poem, a gesture, a dramatization, a book or a fragment of it, are always immerse in dense subjective plots, trimmed with multiple reasons, some of them clearer and familiar and others less visible and complex.

#### COMMUNITY AND LOCAL DEVELOPMENT CULTURE

HIV prevention projects are implemented in the community because it is the space where the daily life of people takes place, where being, knowledge, love, power and action combine. Maybe we could say that it is the domain where the most dynamic concept of culture is expressed.

The community is more than a geographical location because it is, first and foremost, a human conglomerate with a sense of belonging. Thus, community is history, traditions, shared interests, spiritual and physical reality, costumes, habits,

norms, symbols, and codes. Therefore it can be linked to a big or small space, a neighborhood or a social entity or to a specific group of persons.

One of the most important elements in HIV control is the full understanding of the subjective intentions of the persons, which are in correspondence with community identity and culture and its historical development stage. It is a matter of understanding what is beyond the norm and common sense; what diversity, peculiarities and individualities generate in a heterogeneous context as a result of real and concrete elements whether known or unknown, unexpected or inexplicable.

Therefore, the capacity building process foreseen in HIV education projects must involve the study of the reality and learning by the stakeholders in order to provide a solution to the problem with full respect for the persons, the wellbeing, and justice, which implies respect for social traditions and a proper use of the information.

Culture is also the participation of each and every human being in the process of creation and appropriation of meanings and senses implicit or explicit in the active communication and interaction with their environment and fellow men. This shall enable them to achieve their interests and aspirations.

Its content is focused on participatory processes and activity where the educational and formative element, the acceptance of "otherness," talent display, participatory life-styles, and closer ties among human beings, are very important. Over-centralization and imposition should be avoided as it renders the experiences of each group and individual less spontaneous and impoverishes the experiences of each group and individual as well as the indispensable favorable climate so encouraging for any process of creation and expression (12). Doing away with barriers that alienate individuals and groups and make them grow further apart, would be the first step for change in terms of HIV prevention and control.

Undoubtedly, participation is a prerequisite for any true development process; it is a democratic act and a process of individual and collective self-learning within the decision-making process itself, and entails the active commitment of those who choose to be part of it. It is defined as the set of activities carried out by the different social actors (individual, group, society) for an action project addressing their needs and expressed in different forms and intervention levels in the sociocultural life; a reflection through dialogue and actions of the people allowing them to identify and become aware of their problems and conflicts, and search for strategies to solve them (13).

As participation is not something abstract but rather concrete, one of its forms of expression are the levels. The first level, the most basic one, is the beneficiary, where the target population is the recipient of cultural programs and actions developed by outside actors.

The other levels would be:

- mobilization: subjects are called to implement specific designed tasks;
- consultation, discussion and/or conciliation: the essential aspects of the projects are drawn up and opinion is requested or decisions are made on nonvital alternative elements;
- delegate and control: power is committed to implement or control a established project, where variations in accordance with the scenario in question are admitted;
- shared responsibility and co-decision: intervention in the decisions, from identification of needs to evaluation of actions.

As we can gather from the above paragraph, individuals and groups can play an active or passive role in community participation, a key element in evaluating the results, relevance, and sustainability of projects with a sociocultural approach.

It is a question of finding the evidence to prove its effectiveness, generalize good practices and introduce the correction measures when required.

#### CULTURAL RESEARCH APPROACHES AND TECHNIQUES

Cultural research is one of the forms of social research to study human behavior, social relations and man's micro-world. It is an eminently qualitative paradigmatic vision focusing on values, concepts, and the interpretation of daily life, the day-to-day experience.

This is an inductive process which entails the compilation and analysis of daily life data, in which the community and the local environment acquire a new dimension when interpreting what happens on the basis of new data or new theoretical positions. Qualitative research in this context assumes two basic modalities: the ethnographic interpretative approach and the so-called participatory research (14).

The ethnographic interpretative approach (EIA). It is conceptualized as a heuristic process<sup>1</sup> that attempts to describe and interpret in a detailed, in-depth and analytical manner the activities, beliefs or daily processes of the members of a given group within the natural environment in which they take place in an attempt to set such data in a broader cultural and social system.

The interpretative scientific paradigm on which it is based directly assumes the subjective aspect, giving a key role to the perspective of the members of the group in the interpretation of the processes, as it tries to understand the vision of "the others," particularly that of the minorities. It uses intensive qualitative techniques: participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and life stories, among others.

Participatory approach. Participatory research is based on a criticism of the economic and political systems that prevailed in Latin American societies during the 1960s and emerges to challenge traditional science.

Scholars in this part of the world take up Gramsci's idea of establishing a counter-hegemony culture, questioning the American and European research paradigms based on experimental methodology due to its inability to explain and solve the big social problems.

Participatory research attempts to analyze and understand social reality and transform it for the benefit of individuals from a community or group. The distinctive feature of this approach is that stakeholders are to investigate themselves, categorize their problems and take actions to solve them.

In the participatory paradigm, participation is conceived as organic, constant, increasing, autonomous, and truly representative of a swirling action-reflection process. It assumes the existence of a popular science and the power of groups to transform their reality. It stresses the transforming action as the object of the research and the source of knowledge. It uses consensus-seeking techniques such as group discussions, focal groups, public sessions, community seminars, and all the techniques used for developing group creativity.

In short, it can be stated that participatory ethnographic research is innovative because it integrates three basic elements: research, education-learning, and action. Through this research, the community can have a scientific knowledge about its reality and how to transform it, making use of the instruments of science. The research process is carried out from an inward and bottom-up perspective, thus benefiting its members directly and indirectly.

This perspective is basic in cultural projects for HIV prevention, in which infected and affected persons have played a decisive role in contributing to reduce stigma and discrimination, as well as for social empowerment. This role should increase as an instrument of scientific knowledge of and about the group in order to crack the vulnerabilities contributing to the pandemic spread of the disease.

#### RESULTS OF SOCIOCULTURAL PROJECTS FOR HIV PREVENTION IN CUBA

The analysis of the experiences was made through a qualitative method based on a participatory research approach, using the techniques of observation, interrogation and documentary review of the projects registered in the archives of the STI-HIV/AIDS National Prevention Center and its provincial and municipal branches to corroborate their performance and validity. Key informants such as the heads of cultural creativity projects, managers, promoters, and those in charge at the national and provincial levels, were interviewed. The performance of projects in Villa Clara and Guantánamo provinces, which were selected because of the variety of proposals and their results, were monitored.

Sociocultural projects for HIV prevention related to music, dance, theatre, plastic arts, drag shows, literature, and films, as the main expressions, were identified in all provinces of the country. Sixty six project profiles were inventoried, out of which 45 had full index cards and 21 had partial index cards.

As to structure, there were projects of a national, provincial, municipal or purely local scope. In terms of objectives, they were aimed at sensitizing, motivating, mobilizing and empowering through art the different population groups—particularly the most vulnerable ones—according to age, sex, sexual preference, religious belief, place of residence, institutions, sectors, and HIV serology status. There was a cross-cutting gender approach based on the basic principles of fostering unity, respect for diversity, solidarity and equality (8).

Prevention and change were addressed in three dimensions (personal, institutional, and community) on the basis of a strict enquiry process about the living conditions and life-styles of the group to which actions were targeted.

A micro-analysis of the projects enabled the identification of some common trends in HIV prevention actions that can be considered as good practices:

- Study of the reality—including coexistence in the community—in order to design the creativity project.
- Structuring projects based on the vision of stakeholders, their beliefs and set of values, and the features of local culture. This has enabled the development of prevention strategies that include in their actions the concepts, prejudices, and barriers of the target population on risks, healthcare and sexual protection.
- Involvement of all social actors in the solution of problems, particularly the mobilizing capacity of artists, intellectuals and national and local leaders, and of their work, free of charge.
- The design of HIV prevention projects as part of comprehensive and integral cultural proposals fostering the transmission of values, beliefs, perceptions and knowledge for life through artistic creation.
- Exercise of the will of creators and governmental and social leaders of the community, as well as intersectorial development as a means to address the economic limitations with creative initiatives by tapping local resources.
- Training of human resources capable of implementing and consolidating the actions of the sociocultural approach.

Hence, projects we have referred to have been implemented in accordance with the economic and cultural context that provides the support and allows for innovation in HIV/AIDS prevention actions in different vulnerable groups and contexts. Their



commitment has been to foster—in the context of a broader multisectorial response—changes in the life-styles and ways of life of the population to reduce the number of new infections and treat with dignity those persons living with HIV/AIDS.

The beneficiaries of these projects perceive positive effects in the territories and populations to which these projects are aimed, mentioning, inter alia:

- increase in the number of spaces for gathering, training, dialogue, socializing, awareness-building, and visibility of the HIV health problem through culture;
- higher degree of knowledge, organization and maturity of the different sectors and institutions in the communities for the implementation of the sociocultural approach;
- capacity building and development of artistic talents in the target population;
- broader scope of actions and information services, care, and support (condoms, lubricants, educational material, counseling, orientation, and others);
- encouragement to and acknowledgement of the work of those supporting persons living with HIV.

The projects in the inventory are only a sample of what is being done in the country and even though there are different levels of creative maturity and artistic excellence among them, it can be stated that there is a strong cultural approach—culture understood in its broadest sense—to the HIV health problem.

In a text entitled “Socialism and Culture,” the Italian intellectual Antonio Gramsci said:

... we must get rid of the habit and stop conceiving culture as an encyclopedic knowledge in which man is seen only under the form of a recipient that has to be refilled and shored up with empirical data, with facts ... Culture is something quite different. It is organization, discipline of the inner self, conquest of a higher consciousness, through which one can understand one's historical value, one's function in life, one's rights and duties. But none of this can happen spontaneously ... above all, man is spirit, that is to say, historic creation ... [15].

Undoubtedly, the individual decisions made by each human being respond to his/her peculiar system of values, beliefs, and perceptions, nuanced cultural and historical influences, models and expectations of the community they live in, and the social group and family they belong to, within, of course, the limits imposed by the social and economic development context in which persons must make their decisions.

#### FINAL REMARKS

Cultural creativity projects for HIV prevention are an expression of previous development and the experience accumulated by health personnel, health educators, and Cuban creators, though they undoubtedly constitute a field under construction. Hence the need for learning the experiences and criteria of actors from other geographic and cultural contexts, in order to provide the universality character and the evidence of its effectiveness as irrefutable proof of the importance of a cultural approach to HIV prevention.

#### NOTES

1. Refers to the science that studies creativity.

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