

Strengthening Community-based Services for Children and Families Affected by HIV: An Evaluation of the Zambia Family Program

Throughout sub-Saharan Africa, children and their families have been hard hit by the HIV epidemic. Governments and the donor community have responded by funding care and support interventions for HIV-affected households. But these and other stakeholders need to know whether and how such community-based programs mitigate HIV impacts on vulnerable children and their families.

As the U. S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) pivots its focus to care and treatment, there is strong interest in learning to what extent community-based programs contribute to achieving the public health goals of getting people—including children and adolescents—tested, enrolled in care if infected, and adherent to treatment.

Project SOAR's evaluation of the Zambia Family (ZAMFAM) program will generate critical evidence to help fill knowledge gaps. The evidence will also guide country and global decision-makers in strengthening community-based services to better meet the care, support, and treatment needs of vulnerable children and their families.

Research Partners: Project SOAR, Population Council and ZAMFAM

Location: Lusaka, Copperbelt, Southern and Central provinces, Zambia

Study Duration: 2015–2019

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WHAT IS ZAMFAM?

ZAMFAM (2015–2020) is a U. S. Agency for International Development (USAID)-supported program to improve the care and resilience of children from birth to 18 years of age living with, affected by, or vulnerable to HIV, and their families. ZAMFAM strengthens households, and community and government structures to meet children's needs in the following areas:

- health and nutrition
- food security
- shelter
- schooling
- child protection
- social and psychosocial support
- HIV prevention, care, and support

The program is being implemented by Expanded Church Response (ECR) Trust in Lusaka and Copperbelt provinces and by Development Aid from People to People (DAPP) in Southern and Central provinces. Both organizations are collaborating closely with the Zambian government and other stakeholders to improve social welfare and health systems, and promote strong coordination and delivery of services.

OUR RESEARCH

SOAR, in collaboration with ZAMFAM partners, is conducting a:

- Benchmark assessment to determine the current well-being of the children and families that ZAMFAM serves.
- Cohort study to assess how the ZAMFAM program has affected the well-being of children living with HIV and their families.

Benchmark assessment

This cross-sectional study will produce a snapshot of child and household well-being among ZAMFAM's beneficiaries as the program scales up across PEPFAR Zambia's 25 priority districts.

SOAR researchers are surveying caregivers living in 2,100 randomly selected households in ZAMFAM communities across the four provinces about their household's well-being. The selected households are beneficiaries of the ZAMFAM program. The researchers also are collecting data on at least 1 vulnerable child per household either by directly interviewing the child, if ages 10–17 years, or posing questions to the caregiver if the child is younger than 9 years of age.

Cohort study

Over a three-year period, SOAR will follow a cohort of children (ages 5–17) living with HIV. The cohort study uses a non-randomized, quasi-experimental design with program and control areas. Half of the sample will consist of children residing in communities served by ZAMFAM while the other half will be from non-ZAMFAM areas. The study aims to determine if participation by HIV-positive children in ZAMFAM activities is associated with greater improvements in child and household well-being indicators, including retention in care and treatment adherence. The researchers also will examine whether improvements in child well-being indicators vary by age and sex.

The researchers will interview children living with HIV and their caregivers enrolled in the study at baseline, 12, 24, and 36 months.

Ethical Practices

The Population Council has gained important knowledge and experience from undertaking research with children on sensitive topics that we will draw on in recruiting study participants, obtaining informed consent, and maintaining confidentiality.¹ The protocols for the benchmark and cohort studies will be reviewed by the Population Council's Institutional Review Board (IRB), the ERES Converge IRB in Zambia, and the National Health Research Authority.

¹See *Ethical Approaches to Gathering Information from Children and Adolescents in International Settings*, available at popcouncil.org.

SOAR researchers will also conduct more detailed interviews with a subset of male and female participants and/or their caregivers. This qualitative component of the study aims to understand if, and how, the ZAMFAM program meets their needs, and the facilitators and barriers to ART adherence and retention.

RESEARCH UTILIZATION

To lay the groundwork for putting the study findings into practice, Project SOAR is holding meetings with local stakeholders to design and refine the evaluation. These stakeholders include ECR and DAPP; the National AIDS Council; Ministry of Community Development and Social Welfare; Ministry of Health; USAID; and U. S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

An advisory board is forming to guide the study and assess progress through periodic meetings, a field visit with study investigators, and a data interpretation workshop. Feedback from this workshop will inform a national-level dissemination meeting of Zambian stakeholders to reach consensus on priority findings, recommendations, and plans to further disseminate the results and support their use.

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The Population Council leads the Project SOAR consortium in collaboration with Avenir Health, Elizabeth Glaser Pediatric AIDS Foundation, the Johns Hopkins University, Palladium (formerly Futures Group), and The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

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