




# Communications Approach and Perceptual Response in Health Information

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## ABSTRACT

Having informed the surpassing morbidity rate of HIV/AIDS in Gambella than other part of Ethiopia, the researcher motivated seeing communication structure applied in Gambella. Hence, this study came to exist entitled “Communications Approach and Perceptual Response in Health Information”. Specifically, beneath the study, contents, communication approach, health information practice, public interpretation, and contents have been assessed. Methodologically the study designed qualitatively descriptive and case study and the approach was qualitative. Three qualitative instruments of data collection namely key informant in depth interview with concerned ones of GHAPCO, FGD with residents of Gambella through convenient-snowball technique and document analysis have been used. The data was analyzed thematically sequential in line with objectives of the study. The study discovered, language, socio-culture, and educational background of the audiences would not have been praised satisfactorily; and these led to miscommunication between two actors of communication. Moreover, the poorly administered, materials and communication channels used for HIV/AIDS communication in Gambella could not bring the intended effect. Hence, the study recommends possible direction in which better communications approach may come to exist. Accordingly, concerted communication environment which incorporates all vital components of message production, audience analysis, audience segmentation, contextualization, and so forth need to be assured.

**Keywords:** HIV/AIDS communication, HIV/AIDS message, GHAPCO, HAPCO, message, Gambella, Ethiopia

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## INTRODUCTION

### Background

Gambella is located in the South-Western part of Ethiopia; it shares border with Oromia to the north and northeast and (South Nation Nationalities and Peoples Region) to the south and southeast. The region also shares an international boundary with South Sudan to the west. Human health services, including preventative health, health education, and public information about HIV/AIDS, are sparse and poorly equipped throughout the lowland pastoral areas, which are geographically, politically, and culturally marginalized from highland Ethiopia. Following this, in the previous two subsequent growths and transformation period, strategies have been made to strengthen the health and associated factors of the public, though unable to bring the intended achievement.

Following this, in the previous two subsequent growths and transformation period, strategies have been made to strengthen the health and associated factors of the public, though unable to bring the intended achievement. The effectiveness of communication campaigns depends on whether they lead people to adopt prevention methods and

behaviors (USAID, 2018). Furthermore, as per Annett et al. (2006) communication interventions are carried out over the long term continuity over time in order to increase the chance of behavior change.

### Statement of the Problem

Gambella Regional State is the leading state having 6.4% HIV/AIDS prevalence rate as studies revealed Country/Regional Operational Plan (COP/ROP, 2017), though the government and concerned national as well as international organizations like President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) are playing their indispensable role. Health communication programs that focus on prevention have historically relied on a top-down information transmission-based model (Hasler, 2013).

The lack of effective communication creates an environment where there is no voice to address the cause of infection among the most affected groups, including those who are vulnerable (Odine, 2015).

According to Converse et al. (2009), the levels of comprehensive knowledge on HIV/AIDS remain under the expectation. Gulilat (2006) probes on *Afar* traditional communication *Dagu* and its potential for HIV/AIDS prevention. And his finding depicts that the community could not understand the message encoded by the health bureau, rather

the communities' interpretation was far from the intended. In Kenya, although HIV/AIDS awareness is prevalent, Muturi (2007) regrets that a majority of the population do not understand the messages which are communicated. Moreover, Ali and Kassaye (2012) studied at Bahir Dar, and found lack of clear HIV/AIDS communication strategy makes the objectives fail. It is believed that societies who are culturally conservative would be less likely change the mind set status-quo they once sought unless progressive and continual induction is given. Thus, due to unprecedented exceptional prevalence of HIV/AIDS in the region, this study attempted its best looking in to what is underway in Gambella Ethiopia.

## Objectives of the Study

### General objective

The study is aimed at investigating communications approach and perceptual deviation on HIV/AIDS affiliated contents at HIV/AIDS Prevention and Control Office Gambella, Ethiopia.

### Specific objectives

1. Auditing HIV/AIDS's affiliated contents production and
2. Unearth the public interpretation of HIV/AIDS associated messages.

### Research Questions

1. How HIV/AIDS affiliated contents are produced?
2. Which perceptual deviation/resemblance on the intention and reception of messages?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Theoretical Frameworks

#### Behavior change communication theory

Behavior change communication (BCC) is a multi-level tool for promoting and sustaining risk-reducing behavior change in individuals and communities by distributing tailored health messages in a variety of communication channels family health international (FHI, 2002). This model reveals that individuals ought to be informed of fundamental facts and aspects, protective mechanisms proper facilities also be facilitated while behavior changes HIV/AIDS communication. The most important advantage of BCC is that it advances and merge several communication tools rather than availing a single communication tool to effectively reach the target society.

#### Cross-cultural and socio-culture context theory

In this postulation demographic and geographic profile, language consideration, messages or slogans, and campaign duration are chiefly important. Communication is also more effective when using local idioms that are more culturally proximate to the audience.

Socio-cultural and religious contexts must be considered for effective message construction. Similarly, the communicator must consider cross-cultural implications in the choice of certain symbols and colors for particular ethnic group. All one requires is the understanding of the language and the connotations to understand and communicate the message.

### Health Communications

Health communication is one of the branches of development communication. It involves dissemination of information aimed at disease control, prevention, and health promotion (Mugira, 2007). Besides, for Zewdie et al. (2010), health communication is the art and technique of informing, influencing, and motivating individuals, institutions, and large public audiences about important health issues based on sound scientific and ethical consideration.

According to United States Department of Health and Human Services (USDHHS, 2005), to develop effective health communications, you must understand key aspects of the cultures influencing the intended audience and build that understanding into the communication strategy. Tailoring of health communication is a means to increase effectiveness of health information by providing more user centered information. It aims to increase the possibility that the information content is processed and accepted by the receiver (Enwald, 2013). Understanding target audiences and their information preferences as well as developing tailored health information and messages are priorities for all health promotion initiatives (Korda & Itani, 2013).

Taking this in consideration (Corcoran, 2013; Newson et al., 2013), people with lower education may have difficulties in learning and understanding new facts or complex messages as well as difficulties using different kind of technology.

According to McNeilly (2011), effective health communication is something you, as a speech-language pathologist (SLP) and audiologist, should know about as an expert in human communication and its disorders who works in a health-related field.

### Health Message

There are qualities while developing health message labeled Ws:

1. Why do we need to communicate? For whom do we need to communicate?
2. Where is the place?
3. When is the time we communicate?
4. What strategies are to be addressed?

Such questions need consideration. Suggs et al. (2015) use language, visuals, and ideas those are easy to process quickly. USDHHS (2005) posited the important of message in disseminating information and communication for the intended audience and the material also be considered while pretesting the message since that matters on effective communication. That is why, ambiguous messages in terms of connotation, syntax, and expressions may perhaps act as an obstruction to communicate for the reason that the recipient may not be able to capture the actual meaning of the message.

### Media as a Tool for HIV/AIDS Communication

The aim of mass media is to raise public awareness on issues (Green et al., 2015). Via mass media information can spread quickly and widely (Bandura, 2001). Audio-visual, printed, and electronic media have different ways to distribute behavior change message such as documentaries, soap-operas, education entertainment, announcements, cartoons, stories, reports, and various social media channels (Corcoran, 2013; Sood et al., 2014).

If the aim of the message is in behavior change and not that it is just remembered, the message has to be repeated for a long period (Green et al., 2015; Newson et al., 2013). In this regard, according to Lettenmaier et al. (2014), an effective communication campaign requires a definite structure, usually expressed in these nine elements: (1) situation analysis, (2) goal/objectives, (3) target audience, (4) strategy, (5) tactics, (6) media of choice, (7) calendar/timeline, (8) budget, and (9) evaluation.

## DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

### Design of the Study

Qualitatively descriptive and case study designs have been employed. As a result, considering the title and the instrument in which data would be extracted, the researcher used qualitative approach.

### Sample Size and Sampling Technique

For manageability of data, the researcher forced employ limited study areas per the selected area. As a result, the researcher utilized two kebeles, one and three, from the entire three kebeles through systematic sampling technique under the umbrella of probability sampling genre. The rationale for systematic sampling is that, relatively it minimizes bias.

### Study Informants

To achieve the objectives there were four FGD, although in average six participants per a group utilized. Therefore, the study employed total 24 participants for FGD session. And the technique in which participants were sampled was snowball and convenient sampling procedures. Additionally, concerned authority who is intended to recruit for in depth interview or key informant. In essence, public relations of HAPCO has been served as key interviewee.

### Sampling Technique

There were above mentioned two concerned individuals on the area; as a result, they were selected through the purposive sampling. FGD would be through the help of health extension personnel in each kebele and representatives of kebeles. Thus, the procedure was convenient sampling technique. In this regard, health extension workers played a vital role in serving the researcher administering discussion of FGD, since they are familiar than the researcher.

### Instrument of Data Collection

The researcher employed interview, FGD, and document analysis as follows.

### Method of Data Analysis

The data that gained from key informant in form of in-depth interview and FGD broadly qualitative data presented, analyzed and interpreted thematically sequential in light with the objectives and methodology.

### Ethical Considerations

In the whole session of the research beginning from the final submission even after there are ethical and legal issues that must be kept strictly and the researcher gave due attention for those ethical and legal issues such as: credible to the participants, privacy, not plagiarizing, confidentiality, and informed consent kept responsibly.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### The Essence and Production of HIV/AIDS Messages

The public relation and plan program coordinator of HAPCO admitted the importance of properly produced message; and he was concerned in Gambella mentioning challenges they face that is the refusal of messages by the community.

“... If the death comes it is believed to be natural death. They say God decided already.”

He added

“Talking about sexual intercourse it is embarrassing.”  
(Interview date: October 29, 2018)

Thus, this response is directly parallel with the postulation of Suggs et al. (2015). The considerable factors such as language, visual aid, and ideas are easy to process quickly and make it intuitive that people.

### HIV/AIDS Message/Spot/Producer

He responded

“OK! The message is from the people who come from Federal. FHAPCO is main message developer but rarely regional HAPCO. There are some experts at Federal they produce for us because here Gambella we do not have such important professionals to produce.” (Interview date: October 29, 2018)

It is possible concluding GHAPCO is not necessarily producing messages independently unless the support of partners and FHAPCO. In essence, the interviewee (PR) expressed what he known as federal HAPCO is the responsible in providing those messages then they merely consumer of the message:

“As I said messages are primarily produced in federal level then reach to here regional HAPCO.” (Interview date: October 29, 2018)

In fact, the researcher observed some materials prepared by FHAPCO and other partners particularly transnational partners. And this strengthens the response of the interviewee.

### Strategic Audience of HIV/AIDS Message

Strategic audiences are public who believed to be the focus of the intended effect or the spotlight of the project.

“May be there are two classes. First highly exposed part of community particularly sex workers, truck drivers, student of higher education/ tertiary, since they are sexually active. The remain category of audience while message development is clinical and non clinical parts like pregnant, prenatal, throughout birth and postnatal check up, introducing them with why they have to get test their blood, when they have to test blood in order to prevent mother to child transmission.”  
(October 29, 2018)

In the interview which presented formerly, it is possible to understand that a much prioritized strategic audiences are those of highly exposed groups of people. But there are several classes of audience based on their status quo and social contexts.

For instance, tertiary educational institution students, cross country or long drivers, and ladies who work in hotels and streets. In other word, though, vulnerable populations are the mainly considered strategic decoder of message while producing messages; there are collective audiences that perceived as strategic public.

Moreover, message is not all identical in HIV/AIDS cases. There are prevention messages, controlling message also message intended to reach the audience like elders, youths and the like age category or variety of social groups. Important to mention that the other spectrum of message production is measured or based on the anticipated impact on the community; therefore, behavior change messages, social development messages, and we have also information and education messages and the other tenet of messages. Saying behavior change messages, it is projected on letting the strategic public live accordingly or letting them practice in line with the message they brought.

### Message Production Frequency and Community Participation

According to WHO accredited timing,

almost all messages need to be repeated frequently for people to remember them. If a campaign's goal is to change behavior, communicators must plan timing and sequencing of messages along a continuum from awareness to action.

"no fixed time and the frequency often three times per a year; If they plan to develop two times per a year it is also up to them (HAPCO)." (October 29, 2018)

The interviewee remarks that no defined period to produce messages to the public. Against the information sought, communication especially in HIV/AIDS cases, because of its severity, communication ought to be repeated now and then and impose on the mind of the audience. The more frequent the messages produced the more impact it brings.

"Generally, the community is the receiver of the message; they are not producer of message. No part given to public participate while message development program. But I think it is better participating community members." (October 29, 2018)

Letting the community part of message developer makes the message direct and effective. The messages the community produced are the reflection of the mass community. Again, the finding seems contrary with UNAIDS (2001).

Label community participation as reference group refers to a group which a person aspires to associate himself with, therefore, it is a very effective technique to convey message by giving representation to that particular group or a person belonging to that group. So, here national bureau for HIV/AIDS at the same time UN for AIDS clearly stated how valuable community participation plays in challenging HIV/AIDS; more specifically making community one pillar of message producer.

### Communications Form and Its Application

From the forms of communication verbal, non-verbal, and symbolic; and they all have their proper situation to practice. Theories and models adopted that match with the strategic audience, and intended effect and the content to be delivered. For instance, the theory like—diffusion of innovation can be preferable for HIV/AIDS communication through verbal communication.

"Here the frequently used form of communication is verbal because almost people in Gambella are uneducated. So we use verbal to reach them."

He added,

"materials which come from federal are peer to peer education material; we effectively avail these peer to peer education materials; what is more mini-media, we utilize mini-media. Rarely frequency modulation/FM/ radio availed to reach the public, but it is not accessible all the time." (October 29, 2018)

A group of people, who are barely educated, prefer communication process via verbal. Since people in Gambella are less literate, verbal communication is preferable for such population. Advocacy materials mainly comes from federal produced focusing verbal nature of communication; and as mentioned by informant peer to peer education given to people as possible mechanism of communication.

Again, the important clues brought from the finding is, since verbal nature of communication chiefly used in Gambella, better seeing in line with diffusion of innovation theory. To this effect, all five segment of groups in which diffusion of innovation theory is comprised ought to be structured. And it can underpin the effectiveness of messages.

### Available HIV/AIDS Communications Medium

WHO label it saying

"communicators need reliable channels for reaching decision-makers, disseminating messages and distributing materials. ...communicators should analyze the audience's access to different channels and its preference's."

So, it is unarguable the more multiple the channel the more effective the intended impact. Audience who do not have radio needs to get information through poster and the like.

"Banner, leaflet, and brochures are from the most important communication platforms we use frequently." (October 29, 2018)

These findings confirmed the office particularly uses printed media rather than other platforms. It has a certain contrary features with postulation of world health organizations. WHO suggests as much as possible using optimum capacity, communicators need to meet the desired audience using several medium options. Contrary to the finding of Ali and Kassaye (2012), the current one shows there would not have been appreciable usage broadcast media. Of course print media has own plenty importance especially in the area which traditional media and social media have been hardly accessed. Surprisingly the researcher was unable found at least community radio which dedicates in HIV/AIDS communication through indigenous language.

Whilst BCC theoretically conveys, it is a must using variety of platforms, because people need to get information in media which they trust, want and access; the nature of BCC suppose making people adopt the desired behavior.

To this effect, multiplicity of medium for BCC matters highly not only attitudinal change rather behavior change. Hence, better conclude BCC theoretical formulation is not in right way to apply in Gambella principally because of lack of multiple communication medium; since multiplicity of platform considered as one important element of BCC.



Figure 1. Amharic Orthography and translated as “condom promotion and having safer sex”

### Medium of Communication vs. Community's Preference

“Messaging is most effective when it aligns with target audience preferences. Communicators should consider: how the target audience prefers to receive messages, what communications, channels the target audience uses, what messengers the target audience trusts, and any preferences the target audience has for product format and design” (WHO, 2017).

The data posited above implies no materials are carefully developed in light with the population in the region. Though, several drawbacks radio is most preferred media of communication. But notably, even no permanent radio broadcasting services available in Gambella, unless through satellite television. Rarely one radio station reaches to Gambella. So, this finding depicts as the region is isolated than the other part of the country. As the extracted data, the office in collaboration with the rarely accessed media produces programs focusing on HIV/AIDS, but still the medium of transmission is not indigenous language rather Amharic language.

### Audience Reception and Implications of HIV/AIDS Communications via Poster

Poster is one from the several HIV/AIDS communication products used by GHAPCO and partners in the region. As aforementioned, poster supposed to be the most important medium of communication.

FG discussants were participated for poster reflection after observing. Inherently, message or content may be interpreted against the desired interpretation of the encoder. Particularly, the more the subject used as a medium of communication is pictorial, the more difficult interpreting the same way. Since pictorial description contains a full of abstract rather than concrete description. So far, informants participated in FGD assert the poster in Figure 1 accordingly.

Here, this description particularly the caption or headline intended to assert having safe sex may serve as one of prevention mechanism. However, informants attach meaning based on their understanding, background, exposure and other related factors.

As a result, according to the finding extracted from focus group discussants, there are various interpretations worth and contrary to the

desired meaning. Since discussants were almost in the same socio economic and academic background, they shared meaning almost alike. What the finding suggests is the woman is laughing and giving him something packed.

On the other hand, the man is warning her pointing his finger; as it shows she committed something which annoys him. And of course they seem husband and wife. Additionally, the captions bellow the picture; but this poster may intend to state that wives respect to their husband. Except very few informants almost all discussants were unable reading Amharic, as a result, difficult to understand what the caption is saying. The data shows there are no offensive elements rather it might help us to have peaceful coexistence with husbands and wives. Some of the discussants perceived the lady is showing him a packed condom, but greater number of informants could not understand as it was condom.

According to Scannell (2007), the success of a communication message occurs when the receiver correctly interprets the sent message. Contrarily, the finding suggests the intended effect carried out in the medium and the interpretation varies. Thus, better conclude communication effectiveness in GHAPCO and its partners with their public is endangered.

The pictorial presentation is almost abstract. The finding extracted from focus group discussants also strengthens the former sentence. Possible providing the picture for those who can identify abstracts easily because of their ability of understanding especially literate. From the informants' one, some were able identifying the picture and the intended message partially. Even though, for literate the picture seems to claim familiarize them being addictive or drug user may expose people to HIV/AIDS.

Figure 2 posited red cross hugely to say no to drug and informants surprisingly could not understand as the desired meaning. Implicit to the red cross: there are drinks, cigarette, chat, and the like. But according to the finding informants could not get understand what the subject intend to convey. But some informant of the study found the subject telling them not to drink and unfortunately one informant was able to read the caption so he reasonably justifies what the material intend to say.

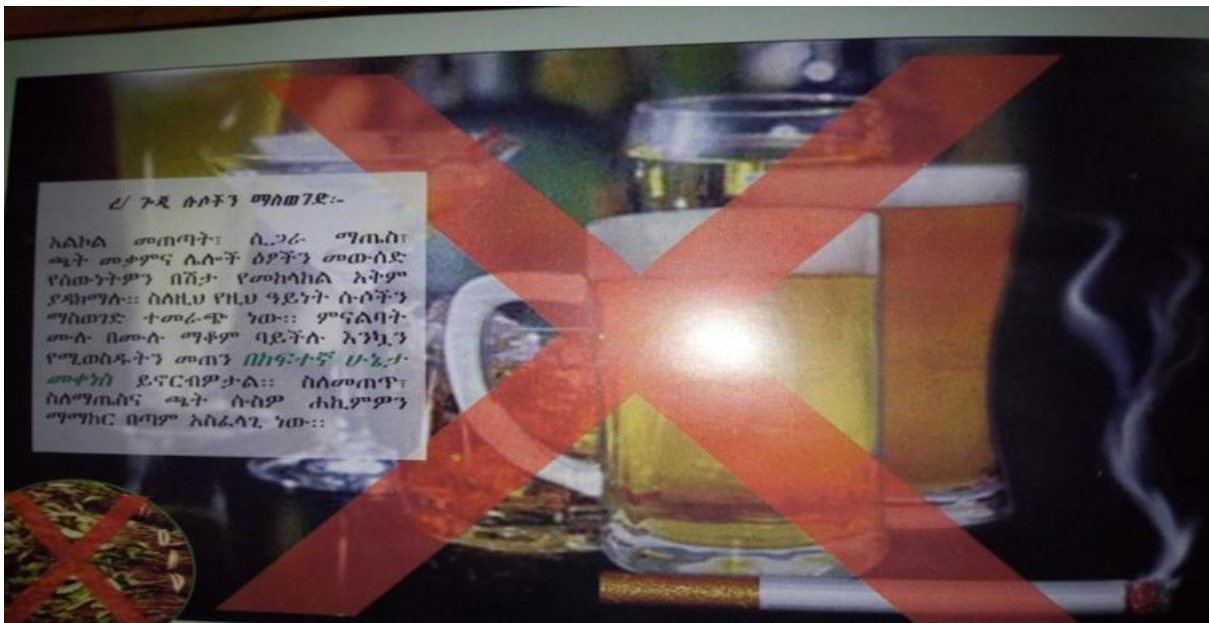


Figure 2. Harmful HIV/AIDS intensifier (beer)



Figure 3. Amharic Orthography and advocates the use of HIV/AIDS voluntary counseling and testing

Therefore, this finding alleges the material are not in the proper line of addressing messages because of leaving the different background of the potential public. In addition to this, the finding implies the weakness of GHAPCO in monitoring and evaluation of communication. And lack of pretesting HIV/AIDS communication spots whether functional or dysfunctional and understandable or not.

The researcher allies the finding with previous discoveries of Corcoran (2013) and Newson et al. (2013):

People with lower education may have difficulties in learning and understanding new facts or complex messages as well as difficulties using different kind of technology.

Following, some spots produced beyond the cognitive understanding of the people.

Figure 3 basically produced to tell the people about voluntary counseling and testing /VCT/ and it's benefit for being proactively prevent HIV/AIDS with marriage partner. However, informants understood partially instead of understanding completely. In essence, discussants were able to mention and perceive the message in the poster as it is medical examination; the doctor is giving the man and his wife medical treatment. As well as, almost all agreed as the poster is teaching them getting medical examination, but very little discussants claim as the poster is claiming the people to get HIV/AIDS blood test.

According to the discussants agreement the poster would be better understood if the material were produced in line with the potential audience background such as if the people existed get dressed like them and if the people seen in the poster like the people of intended audience. The image which resembles patient's /VCT/ seems to be the social philosophy the other ethnic group.

Visuals description when HIV/AIDS and associated communication better preferred than the other because of its positive characteristics; such as the ability to attract, the ability to motivate, understandably, proximity, and so forth.

### Audience Reception and Implications of HIV/AIDS Audio Communications

Here the researcher made discussant listen to audio production which was originally prepared in written package produced by HAPCO and Ministry of Health. And this material was directly received by Gambella people through health extension workers. These extension workers are dedicated teach the people as it is. And here the researcher administered these workers read in front of the discussant twice and gets the response following reading.

Principally, the audio read by health extension workers focuses on HIV/AIDS prevention, transmission, and antiretroviral therapy (ART) and associated concepts. More than half of focus group discussants listen and understand what the audio intend to deliver saying—*this message is designed to protect ourselves from HIV/AIDS.*"

The discussant all perceived the audio spot prepared to make the people proactively protect themselves. Almost all discussant was not able understand abstinence version of Amharic *metakeb* but conceptually some informants understood fair. Additionally, informants particularly women state one method of protection which label *be faith full*, it is good and husbands are not respecting this method.

As the reflection of respondents the culture of Gambella people allows polygamy for husbands, as a result spouses get married here and there and they come with AIDS. The finding shows behavior change communication still encountering challenges due to rigid cultural assumption of Gambella people. These challenges of behavior change communication led the effectiveness of communication endanger. That is why health communication and in general communication scholars argue prominent and influential person can communicate effectively other than ordinary once; for people inherently follow the prominent.

Surprisingly, HAPCO (2008) itself asserts seven Cs that need to be considered while developing messages; it starts from command attention till call for action. When seeing the finding with the HAPCO (2008), more than half of seven Cs left irresponsibly in Gambella.

The other finding raised from discussants were the language which GHAPCO mainly used to address is not centered by audience, the language has to be considered as possible. But also there were few discussants who argue people know basic information of HIV/AIDS however, what challenging is behavior change. Based on this argument the researcher suggests behavior change message still needs credit. And participate renowned community member work with them in behavior change communication as possible. What is more, the finding suggests, BCC is the one and important model of HIV/AIDS communication.

## CONCLUSIONS

The production of message that aims to reach the public expected comprising valuable elements like concerting messages for specific segmented audience, community participation, and audience's socio-cultural makeup. Even though, GHAPCO and its partners are not necessarily taking into account. Furthermore, the interpretation HIV/AIDS messages understood by the discussants were not as desired by the producer.

GHAPCO failed using communication medium which appraised for behavior change HIV/AIDS communication. Communication approach which means strategic, planned and multiplicity of communication platforms hardly practiced. Communication medium especially abstract description which attached in the poster and brochure would not brought equal understanding between the audiences. Per a single message discussants tended understand differently.

Research and evaluation were unimaginable in GHAPCO; and though in rule of thumb, public information model of public relations communication often practiced. The scientific know-how of the public relations practitioner at GHAPCO has been hardly sufficient.

In GHAPCO the practice and model of public relations communication inevitably shares some features from all four types such as press agency, public information, asymmetric and symmetric but unintentionally. Research and evaluation were unthinkable in GHAPCO and more specifically, public information model of public relations communication often applicable. The scientific know-how of the public relations practitioners at GHAPCO is extremely inadequate.

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