



# Its “Dark Ripple Effect”: Competing narratives of PEPFAR and sex work in Southern Africa

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## Background:

The President’s Emergency fund for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) is the largest donor in Southern Africa, spending over US \$6 billion since 2004 and supporting ARV treatment for 1.5 million people.

However, since the introduction of PEPFAR conflicting narratives have appeared regularly. These conflicting narratives often tend to differently describe and interpret the content, intent, impact and outcome of policies, particularly with regards to prostitution.

**Table: PEPFAR funding in Southern Africa in US\$, and numbers of people receiving anti-retroviral therapy in 2010**

Country	PEPFAR funding (USD)	Years	Number of people receiving ARVS in 2010
Botswana	\$557,000,000	(2004-2011)	12,000
Lesotho	\$67,000,000	(2007-2009)	45,700
Malawi	\$155,000,000	(2004-2009)	n/a
Mozambique	\$836,000,000	(2004-2009)	138,800
Namibia	\$432,000,000	(2004-2009)	80,300
South Africa	\$3,113,000,000	(2004-2011)	917,700
Swaziland	\$69,000,000	(2007-2009)	38,700
Zambia	\$1,117,000,000	(2007-2009)	286,000
Zimbabwe	\$98,000,000	(2007-2009)	59,900

Source: <http://www.pepfar.gov/countries/index.htm>

## Results:

The presentation and discussion of PEPFAR’s anti-prostitution clause have varied over time. However, narratives promoting the successes of PEPAR tend to drown out narratives that problematize.

### Narrative 1: Promotion of PEPFAR’s success

Narratives promoting PEPFAR’s success include academic papers and mainstream news. A recent example, is a *New York Times* report:

*“Before [PEPFAR], a lot of people were dying of AIDS,” said Moeketsi Monamela, a 33-year-old coffin-maker here in Maseru, the capital of the mountainous kingdom of Lesotho. A half-dozen years ago, he sometimes crafted 20 coffins a month, he said. Now, he typically sells five or six.”* (Kristof, 2012, July 09).

Elsewhere, an academic paper reports:

*“Between 2004 and 2008, all-cause adult mortality declined more in PEPFAR focus countries relative to nonfocus countries.”* (Bendavid et al, 2012)

Another manifestation of this narrative occurred in a plenary session at the 2011 ICASA conference in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia where PEPFAR efforts were lauded with a standing ovation.

## Conclusions:

Among core and peripheral communities and voices, conflicting narratives about PEPFAR and its implementation were found.

## Methods:

This analysis utilized a competing narrative approach to identify recurrent and conflicting narratives relating to PEPFAR and its implementation among organizations and populations in Southern Africa.

A competing narrative methodology allows the identification and comparison of differing interpretations of phenomena.

Here narratives found in published, ethnographic and interview sources from sex work and public policy communities in Southern Africa and elsewhere were analyzed and similarities and differences in these communities’ interpretations of the PEPFAR policy compared.

### Narrative 2: Problematizing PEPFAR

Sex worker communities and organizations have spoken of PEPFAR’s “dark ripple effect”—the incremental phase-out of sex worker-accessed services, the increasing isolation of sex workers, and fears about disseminating and sharing information about sex work programs and funding.

One informant explained:

*“Many organizations in Africa are receiving the PEPFAR funding and have signed the anti-prostitution pledge in the PEPFAR policy but are scared to open up and disclose [their work with sex workers] for fear of losing the funding.”*

A recent publication reflected:

*“Few data [from countries in Southern Africa in receipt of PEPFAR funds] are available about access to antiretroviral therapy by sex workers ... demonstrating the lack of data about populations disproportionately affected by HIV.”* (Richter, 2011).

A third examples of the problematizing of PEPFAR is found in reports of closures and isolation in Uganda, where

*“organizers and attendees of a sex work conference were threatened, forcing the meeting to move out of the country...More recently, the sex work project that organized this meeting has been raided, its participants arrested, and the organization closed. While it is impossible to pull apart the government’s role from the funders of its HIV programs [PEPFAR] it is clear that this undermines effective HIV prevention for sex workers.”*

Evident were narratives of PEPFAR’s successes as well as narratives of PEPFAR’s suggested harms and the lack of response to them. As competing narratives, those of the status quo promoting PEPFAR’s successes tend to drown out the margins and create an anti-prevention “dark ripple effect.”

This analysis builds on earlier work to suggest that fostering improved dialogue between sex work and US funding communities would help to broaden understandings of PEPFAR’s impacts, better enable marginal voices, and translate to improved HIV service access for sex workers.



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