Community Dialogues on Female Genital Mutilation / Cutting Abandonment

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Context
In 2010 Uganda adopted a national law against Female Genital Mutilation and Cutting (FGM/C). Acceleration of the implementation for this law is much needed, since several communities in Easter Uganda still practice FGM/C. Within the polygamous Tepeth community in Moroto district in Eastern Uganda girls between the age of 11-14 are being cut. The cutting takes place just after the harvest. Community leaders approve the cutting ceremony before it takes place and will only give permission when the harvest has been good and there is enough food available for the ceremonies. After being mutilated in groups the girls stay in a recovery shelter up in the mountain for 3 months. During this healing time the mutilator is the only one allowed to see the girls and parents are requested to bring food. Additional ceremonies are being done during this period to prepare the girls for marriage and to have children. The end of the healing period is marked by another ceremony after which the girls are reunited with their families.

Objectives
The overall objective of the community dialogues on FGM/C, as stated by implementing partner Arbeiter Samariter Bund (ASB) supported by the UNFPA/UNICEF Joint Programme on FGM/C, is to increase the knowledge on the negative consequences of FGM/C within the communities. More specifically 1) To understand how FGM/C is practiced within the Tepeth community, and 2) To involve the community in the initial stages of the anti-FGM/C campaigns while disseminating the FGM/C law 2010 so as to foster acceptance, ownership of the campaign and the eventual sustainability of the end results.

Strategy and Implementation
Before implementing activities ASB conducted a baseline survey in the form of a Knowledge Attitude and Practice (KAP) Survey. Findings showed that most youth were unaware of the negative consequences of FGM/C and most elders were reluctant to share this knowledge with the youth for three main reasons. Firstly, mutilators obtained good business from the practice. Secondly FGM/C is a fast way for the family of the girl to obtain wealth, since cut girls receive a higher bride price than uncut daughters and are married off straight after the FGM/C healing period in most cases. Lastly, old men within the community can afford the high bride price of a cut girl (as opposed to young men who are not in the position yet to pay such high prices) and like to marry the young girls. The study also showed that girls receive a higher status within he community after being cut and there is a lot of pressure from peers to undergo the practice.

ASB decided to hold community dialogue sessions in order to accelerate FGM/C abandonment within the Tepeth communities. During dialogue sessions facilitators would first separate the youth and elders within a given community and discuss 1) how is FGM/C being practiced in this community? 2) Why is FGM/C practiced (community provides the positive effects of FGM/C) 3) what were any negative

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consequences of FGM/C the community encountered? And 4) are there any possible attempts made to stop the practice of FGM/C? From the last question onward the FGM/C law is brought in to the discussion. After talking to the youth and elders separately, the two groups are brought together to share the issues raised with both groups present.

Key challenges
Some of the key challenges encountered during implementation of the community dialogues included 1) difficulties in establishing the FGM/C prevalence rate in the area of operation, since there was no available data at the start of the programme, 2) the communities often live in remote and hard to reach areas of Moroto, and 3) insecurity within the same region. Despite these difficulties ASB has been able to conduct the community dialogue sessions in the most hard to reach parishes in the two sub-counties of Tapac and Katikekile where FGM/C was still practiced. Data is now provided by community leaders.

Progress and Results
Before the implementation of the programme youth within the Tepeth communities were not aware of the negative consequences of FGM/C. One community leader in Moroto valley expressed the results as follows: “The community dialogues have been very effective, the message on FGM/C abandonment spread widely. We now share information about FGM/C with the youth freely. Before this information was only kept to the elders“. During the sessions youth would request the elders to share information with them. The communities state that they now realise the negative consequences of FGM/C. Girls are very young and are still developing when they are being cut; FGM/C can affect their growth rates and increase the risk of stunted growth. Girls face many risks when being cut due to the risk of HIV/Aids infection (mutilators use the same knife for all girls in one group), extreme bleeding and the risk of being handicapped for life. In addition cut girls face complications during childbirth and sexual intercourse. One of the male elders in Moroto explains: “We experience that girls [that have undergone FGM/C] suffer a lot, even during sexual intercourse. Girls are very narrow and are bleeding a lot during the first time. Husbands are complaining that they [their vaginas] are too narrow and there are scars. It is a nasty experience and we don’t want to have this in our community anymore”. Communities also realized about the financial constraints of practicing FGM/C. Parents of a girl that undergoes FGM/C have to pay money to the mutilator in addition to food and new clothes for the girl during and after the healing process. In some cases the parents would be unaware, until the final ceremony after the 3 months healing period that their daughter already died of the consequences of FGM/C. In other cases parents would receive their daughter back with a permanent handicap as a result of the cutting. Through community dialogues members realized how much the mutilators benefit from the practice and how much the girls and families suffer.
The communities also learned about the anti FGM/C law and punishment for practicing FGM/C. One of the elders in Moroto valley told her two sisters, who were practicing mutilators at the time, about the anti FGM/C law in Uganda and the possibility of being arrested. Both sisters have now stopped working as mutilators. Individuals have publicly denounced the practice. After one of the community dialogue sessions a mutilator denounced her practice, hereby making that particular region of Moroto FGM/C free.

Through the community dialogue sessions it became apparent that the majority of the communities was positive about FGM/C abandonment, but feared to be isolated by the community when they would openly do so. After the sessions the Tepeth community in Moroto demanded a police force in their sub-county to enforce the anti FGM/C law. So far 2 police posts have been established near the requesting communities. In the year of implementation of the community dialogues, 2011, no cases of FGM/C have been reported.

Conclusion and Lessons Learned
Community dialogues are an effective way to accelerate FGM/C abandonment. These sessions allow both the community and development partners to learn from each other and to map out what possible actions need to be taken towards achieving FGM/C abandonment. The high level of participation during the community dialogues is essential to ensure ownership of the community. Moreover through these sessions there is direct contact with the community and nothing is being imposed on them. Through the sessions community members opened up, obtained clear knowledge and understanding of the negative consequences of FGM/C and even came up with their own solutions and reasons for saying no to FGM/C. It is necessary to identify with the community you are working with, to gain their trust and to ensure everybody in the community is on board. Finally it is crucial to involve the community leaders.

Recommendations and Next Steps
As stated by ASB, the issue of livelihood for the ex-mutilators is crucial, but was not taken into account in this programme. Communities, including the ex-mutilators should benefit from government projects. In addition it is recommended to continue community dialogue sessions in the hard to reach areas and to organise a FGM/C abandonment declaration day in Moroto District. Finally elders expressed the need to be trained in conducting community dialogue session themselves: “The cutting season is at hand and we fear other communities conducting FGM/C. We want to conduct community dialogues with other communities ourselves to tell them about the negative consequences of FGM/C and to convince them to abandon the practice”.

“Through community dialogues you interact directly with the community, there is no imposing anything, you allow the community to talk and they own the process”

Lorika Claudias Nanta (ASB)
Sources and Contact Persons

Primary sources
- Documented good practice by ASB dd. April 2012.
- Interview with Lorika Claudias Nanta, ASB Moroto Office on May 30th 2012.
- Focus Group Discussion with 10 elders of the Tepeth community in Moroto on May 30th 2012.

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