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Analytical Report

for the intervention evaluation

"Positive Connections: Forming HIV-Positive Adolescents' Conscious Adherence to ART"

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During the period of June 2018 to September 2019, the Analytical Center "*Socioconsulting*" conducted an intervention evaluation called "Positive Connections: Forming HIV-Positive Adolescents' Conscious Adherence to ART" requested by the US Peace Corps in Ukraine. The evaluators' goal was to estimate the final results of the intervention, its impact on the participants', i.e., HIV-positive adolescents' adherence to ART, their psychosocial well-being and quality of life as well as to develop recommendations on improving the intervention and its implementation mechanism. The evaluation results are presented in the Analytical Report.

Methodology

For evaluation purposes, the quasi-experimental design was chosen to study two groups of HIV-positive adolescents aged 10 to 17. One group was an experimental group and the other was a control group. The experimental group (EG) was composed of the adolescents participating in the Peace Corps (PC) intervention during the period of August 2018 to June 2019 (a total of 107 persons). The control group (CG) included the adolescents aged 10 to 17 aware of their HIV status and taking ART, who did not participate in the PC intervention (a total of 99 persons). To evaluate the intervention impact, "before and after" questionnaires were designed. Sociological data was collected before the intervention and after the implementation and was then compared (the interval between the interviews was approximately 3 months). Additional sources of information for the evaluation were the interviews conducted with the parents/caregivers of the adolescents participating in the intervention (a total of 50 persons), and the intervention implementers – NGOs staff, infection disease doctors, etc.

Evaluation results

Due to the participation in the PC intervention, the HIV-positive adolescents-participants improved their knowledge on health-related issues, which inform their decisions in becoming and remaining adherent to ART.

A statistically meaningful increase in the participants' knowledge was observed as related to such indicators:

- Understanding the necessity of taking ART throughout their whole life (after the intervention, the proportion of the correct answers in the EG increased by 13%, in the CG – by 7%);
- Understanding that HIV cannot currently be cured (the proportion of the correct answers in the EG grew by 17%, in the CG – by 9%);
- Understanding that missing some doses of ART presents a risk to patients' health (the proportion of the correct answers in the EG increased by 19%, in the CG remained the same);

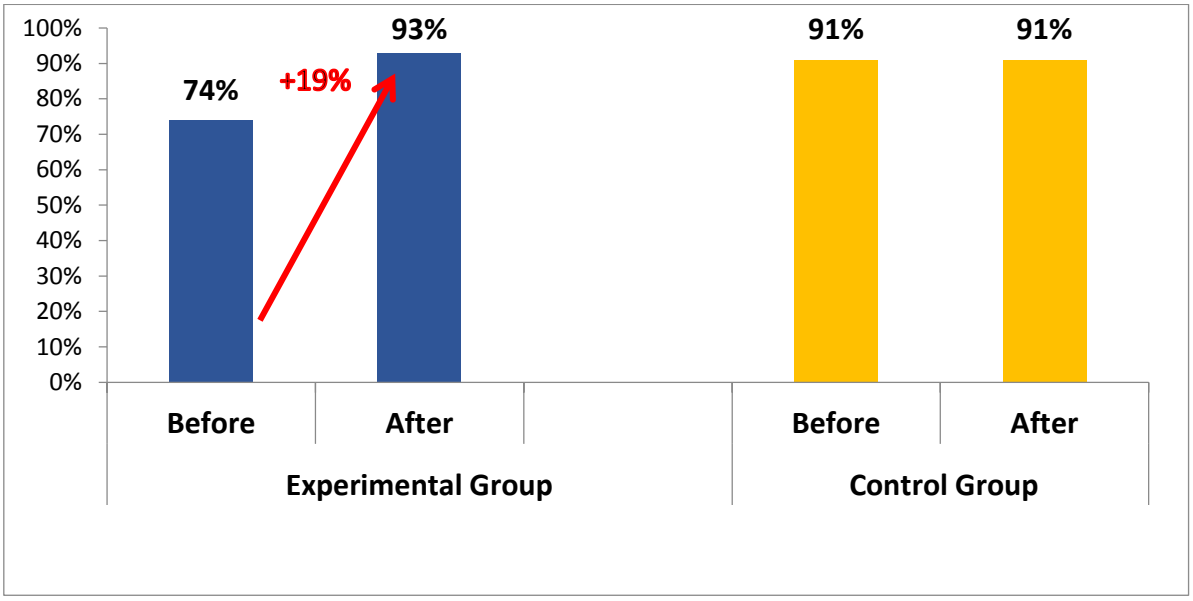

Fig. 1. Percent of adolescents knowing that by breaking the regimen or stopping taking ART, they risk their health and life

- Understanding that it is necessary to immediately - as soon as a patient remembered - take the ART drug if a patient forgot to take it (the proportion of the right answers in the EG grew by 37%, in the CG – by 6%);
- Increase in the number of adolescents knowing their viral load (VL) and CD4 test results. (This indicator was calculated only for the respondents who confirmed during the interview that they undergo tests to identify CD4 and VL). During the observation time, positive dynamics were recorded in the EG (+18%); in the CG, a decrease of the proportion of the respondents familiar with the test results is noted (-11%);

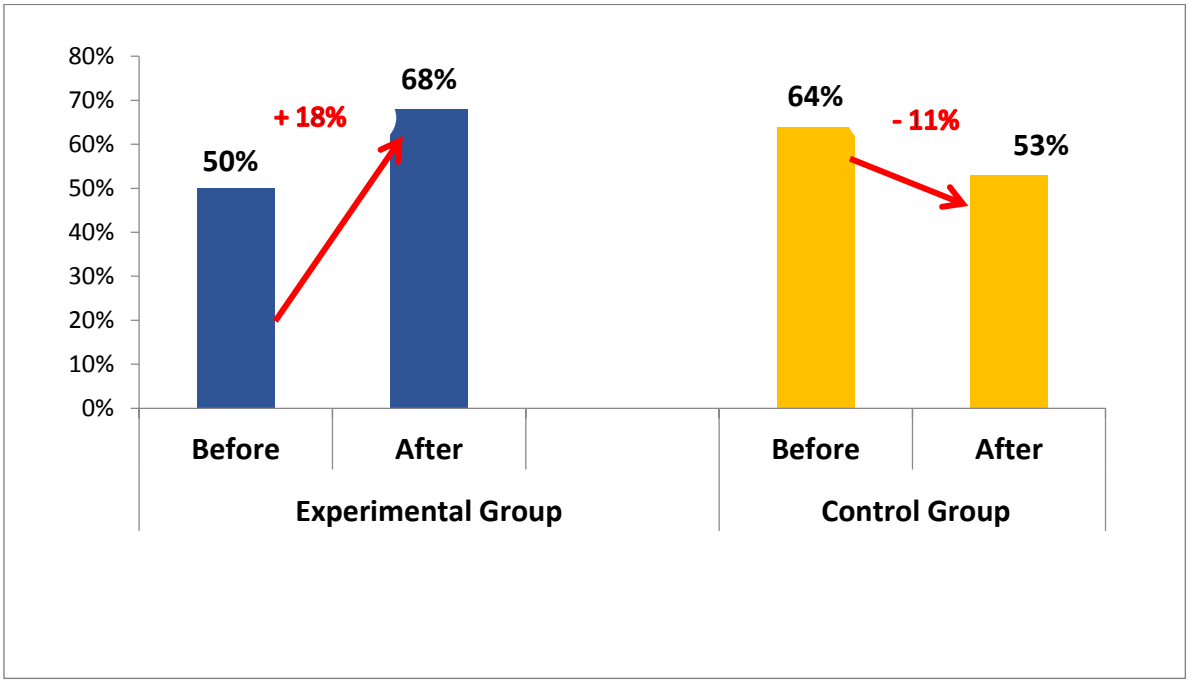

Fig. 2. Percent of adolescents knowing the results of their VL and CD4 tests

- a positive dynamics as related to VL decrease of participants of EG whose VL was significant before the intervention and decreased after it;

Table1

Dynamics of VL suppression among youth whom pediatricians recommended for the intervention based on the youth's high VL

Gender	Oblast/Region	VL before the intervention	Test date	VL after the intervention	Test date
m	Odesa	**31800**	11. 30.2018	**<40**	04. 23.019
f	Kherson	**94**	06. 19.2018	**< 40**	05. 03.2019
f	Cherkasy	**115**	11. 26.2018	**< 40**	02. 26.2019
f	Cherkasy	**62**	12. 05.2018	**< 40**	03. 11.2019
f	Cherkasy	**91**	12. 11.2018	**< 40**	03. 12.2019
m	Cherkasy	**411**	12. 24.2018	**21**	03. 20.2019
f	Cherkasy	**312**	11. 27.2018	**< 40**	02. 18.2019
f	Kyiv	**200000**	07. 30.2018	**< 40**	12. 27.2018

- Increase in the frequency of visits to a HIV speciality doctor. After the participation in the PC intervention, the proportion of adolescents in the EG who chose the option "do not remember exactly how often you visit a doctor" decreased from 15% to 8%; additionally, the proportion of respondents who indicated that they visit a doctor quarterly or half-yearly increased considerably (+13%). In the CG these indicators remained unchanged;
- Knowing about the possibility to create a family as discordant couples (question given to adolescents aged 14 and above: the increase in knowledge in the EG is 22%, while in the CG by 7%);
- Understanding the necessity to use condoms during sexual intercourse (question given to adolescents aged 14 and above: the portion of adolescents who mentioned condoms as a way of preventing HIV transmission increased in the EG by 35%, and in the CG by 19%);
- Using alcohol and drugs presents danger for HIV-positive people (question given to adolescents aged 14 and above: the proportion of the correct answers in the EG increased by 25%, in the CG – by 9%).

At the same time, the improvement of the participants' knowledge was not achieved as related to certain indicators such as the algorithm of taking ART in some critical situations, reproductive health and safer sexual intercourse (for adolescents aged 14 and above).

After the intervention the adolescents displayed a higher level of readiness to disclose their HIV-status, became less categorical and more open towards disclosing their status to their immediate social circle. During the final interview, the EG respondents were much less likely (-29%) to reject the possibility to tell their friend about their status than during the baseline interview. The analogous indicator in the CG went down by 9%.

The positive dynamics in the adolescents' attitude to their HIV-positive status and decrease of self-discrimination among the participants are largely attributable to the PC intervention. Given that the group sessions/camps were intended exclusively for HIV-positive children, the adolescents significantly widened the range of support among their HIV-positive peers. Based on the results of the final interview, 82% of the intervention participants had HIV-positive friends or acquaintances supporting each other. This is twice as many as in the CG.

By virtue of the participation in the PC intervention, the adolescents became more active in discussing the issues of treatment and taking ART with specialists. For instance, in the EG, we witnessed a significant increase in the proportion of respondents who discussed these matters with a doctor (+7%) and psychologists or social workers (+49%) within the past 3 months. The positive impact of the intervention is testified by the increase of the proportion of the adolescents who discuss a number of important issues with their parents. Among the issues the adolescents started discussing more openly are taking ART, reasons to take it and rules related to it. They also started discussing more with their parents disclosure of their HIV-status, who to disclose it and how to do it; the specifics of controlling their health, i.e., the results of CD4 and VL tests; reproductive health, in particular safer sexual behavior, family planning and pregnancy, and giving birth to healthy children.

The success of the PC intervention is proven by the increase of the proportion of adolescents who take ART regularly every day. The interviews demonstrate that the proportion of the adolescents who participated in the intervention and indicated that they never missed their ART within the latest 30 days, rose from 57% to 69% (by 12%), while among the CG participants it remained unchanged.

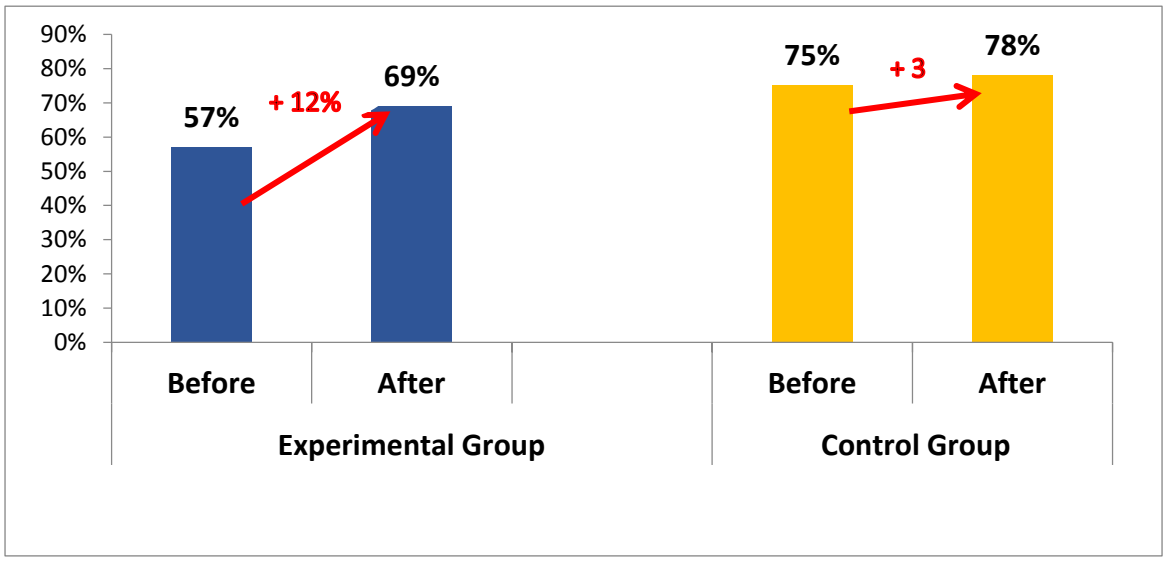

Fig. 3. Percent of adolescents who have never missed ART in the past 30 days

Many parents/caregivers testify the increase in the adolescents' level of self-sufficiency in taking ART, increase of the adolescents' interest in their VL and CD4 results, and their efforts to lead a healthy life style. Most adults (38 out of 50 interviewed) associate the positive changes in the adolescents' attitude toward their health with their participation in the PC intervention.

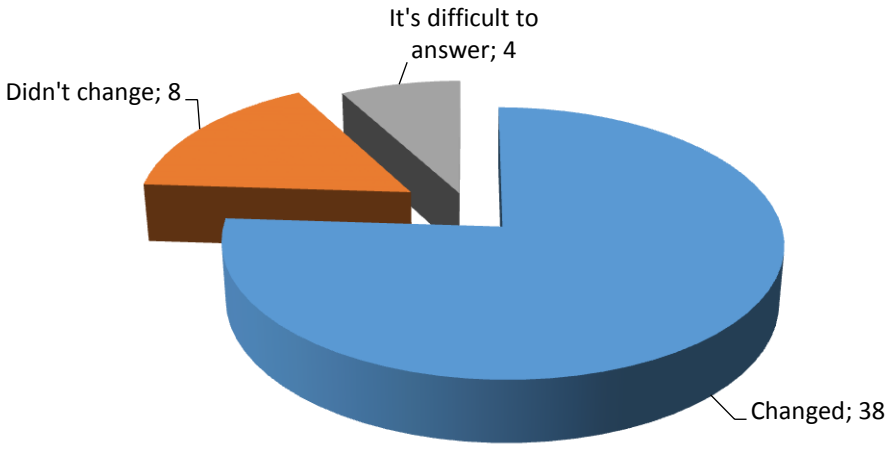

Fig. 4. Parents/caregivers opinion on changes in the adolescents' attitude to their health after the intervention, *persons*

The intervention had a positive impact on parents and caregivers of the HIV-positive adolescents as well. They became more active in discussing issues related to their children's health and treatment with psychologists, social workers (78%) and other parents/caregivers (40%). According to the doctors' replies, their communication and interaction both with adolescents and parents/caregivers became more constructive after the intervention.

Both beneficiaries and the health service providers are largely consentient in assessing the PC intervention. They see the intervention as indispensable as it proves to have a positive impact on adolescents living with HIV. Learning new information, forming communication skills and the ability to control their emotions and feelings, adolescents become more responsible towards their health, accepting of their HIV-positive status and more adherent to ART. Unfortunately, there are no other special comprehensive programs or services aimed at supporting HIV-positive adolescents on the mentioned matters that exist in Ukraine.

Increasing the number of parents participating in the intervention, establishing an effective cooperation between social workers and doctors - when selecting potential participants of the intervention and monitoring the results - more trainings for facilitators, mobilizing resources to motivate both intervention providers and its participants would increase the efficiency of the intervention even more.