

## THE PEER METHOD

### The PEER Approach

- PEER is based upon the anthropological method in which a relationship of trust is built up between the researcher and the community. Unlike traditional anthropological research PEER can be carried out over a short time-frame (5–6 weeks).
- PEER is based upon training members of the target group (eg sex workers, men who have sex with men) to become peer researchers. The peer researchers are trained to carry out in-depth conversational interviews among their own peer group.
- Peer researchers are selected and recruited by the programme in conjunction with the target population. The most important issue in selecting peer researchers is that they are members of the community which is the target group for the programme and motivated and willing to participate in the research.
- Peer researchers only need to have a basic level of literacy. Non-literate peer researchers have been trained successfully (although it is necessary to allow and extra day or two for the training).

### The Interview Method

- The method is based on the principle that in-depth interviewing of a small number of people over a period of time will produce more valid information on social life and behaviour, than interviewing a large sample of people once only.
- The peer researchers carry out several in-depth interviews with a small sample of people whom they select from within their own peer network<sup>1</sup>.
- All interviews are conducted in the third person. Interviewees are **not** asked to talk about themselves. All interviews ask them to talk about “other people like them” or what other people in their social network say. Peer researchers are **not** asked to name individuals or to give information that could identify individuals (such as where they work). In talking about other people “like them”, interviewees will often talk about their own experiences, without acknowledging that they are talking about themselves.

### The Peer Researcher Training

- The peer researchers receive a three day participatory training, specifically adapted to the needs of the group. Conversational prompts to guide the interviews are developed by the peer researchers during the participatory training.
- Peer researchers field-test the interviews over a 1–2 day period and return for a further 1 day workshop to make any necessary revisions to the prompts, and for further practice of the interviews.
- A maximum of 16 peer researchers can be trained in any one group. All peer researchers trained together should be from the same target group.

---

<sup>1</sup> The term peer as used in this approach refers to people who are members of the same social group and share the same social networks, such as friends, work-mates, school-mates, age-mates, or members of a kin group or neighbourhood group.

## Data Collection

- Data collection is carried out over short time frame (three to four weeks) during which time the peer researchers interview between 3 people they have chosen from their social networks.
- Peer researchers make some notes to remind themselves of the interview using data sheets. However, peer researchers are only asked to write down a few key words on their data collection sheets.
- During data collection the peer researchers receive regular supervision (usually every week depending upon their needs). The supervisor interviews the PERs in-depth on the interviews they have collected during the previous week and makes their own detailed notes of their interviews.

## Data Analysis

- There are two stages to the data analysis process:
  - All peer researchers are interviewed by an experienced social researcher over 4–5 day period, at the end of the data collection. The social researcher produces a detailed report of the data analysis.
  - Peer researchers also conduct their own data analysis process. This takes the form of a workshop in which peer researchers work as a group to identify: key issues emerging from the interviews; lessons learned for the programme; and changes to the tool for further use by the programme for research and monitoring.

## Value of the PEER Approach

- An important outcome of the peer research approach is the ensuing dialogue that it generates between the peer researchers and the development programme or agency, and between the peer researchers and other people in their social networks.
- Use of the PEER method will expose field and programme staff to the life styles and livelihood strategies of the peers (and hence target groups) and also facilitate the recruitment of future peer/community based workers.
- Experience to date shows that for the peer researchers the approach offers the potential for greater engagement with their peer group on issues of central importance to their lives and everyday social practices, and can be the start of an empowerment process for marginalised groups.