Title: Civil Society Activism in Accessing Healthcare in South Africa

Coordinator: Dr Catherine Ndinda, HSRC

Members:
- Dr Zitha Mokomane, HSRC
- Mr Tholang Mokhele, HSRC
- Mr Velile Gqamane, HSRC
- Ms Desire Chilwane, HSRC

Summary

Civil society organisations have been at the forefront of contributing to public health for centuries but in recent years their role has become more prominent and their influence has had a profound impact on health policy and issues. Indeed, the manner in which the state responds to health challenges and the extent to which civil society actors are recognized and included in health policies and programmes, are some of the critical factors determining the course of public health today (WHO, 2001). Civil society activism around HIV and AIDS in South Africa has yielded remarkable results in gaining access to treatment in the country. Overall, the cross-cutting support for the work of civil society in accessing HIV/AIDS treatment emboldened in devising a range of strategies that resulted in changing government attitude to the epidemic. Some of the outcomes include the implementation and roll-out of the Prevention of Mother-to-Child-Transmission Programme in government clinics. Legal action by the organisation Treatment Action Campaign against pharmaceuticals resulted in the lowering of prices for antiretroviral (ARV) medicines. The work of civil society also resulted in pressuring the government to provide antiretroviral therapy (ART) in state hospitals.

Much less is known, however, about civil society activism in gaining access to treatment for other health conditions that contribute to mortality in South Africa. These diseases which have resulted in the loss of 65,000 lives per year include heart diseases, stroke, hypertension, and diabetes (Statistics South Africa, 2006; Puoane et al, 2008). Analysts note, “these data suggest that after HIV and AIDS and tuberculosis (TB), the prevention of non-communicable disease should be a top priority in the country’s health agenda” (Pouane, et al, 2008:74). The aim of this study is to compare the effectiveness of civil society strategies in providing ‘universal access’ to healthcare in South Africa. Particular focus will be on major diseases in the country: HIV and AIDS and selected non-communicable diseases. The specific objectives are:

1. To examine the political and social context of healthcare provision in SA.
2. To explore the strategies used by HIV and AIDS civil society organisations in advocating for access to treatment and other services.
3. To explore the strategies used by civil society organisations representing non-communicable diseases such as heart, stroke and diabetes in advocating for access to treatment and other services.

4. To compare the effectiveness of the different civil society organisations’ strategies in ensuring access to healthcare.

Like Adejumọ & Ehlers (2002) we note that comparative studies often present methodological challenges. While most comparative studies have tended to compare phenomena in different geographical settings, this study compares strategies of civil society organisations within the same country, South Africa.

Based on the objectives of the study, a qualitative comparative methodology will be adopted. This study will examine the strategies employed by civil society organisations involved in HIV/AIDS advocacy and compare these with strategies used by organisations dealing with advocacy on non-communicable diseases. Data will be collected using document and literature review, and key informant interviews.