

## Examples of Formative Research Activities for HIV-Prevention Trials

Formative research activities can be **formal** or **informal**. When we talk about formal activities, we are referring to activities that require formal ethics review committee approval. All activities, informal and formal, require dedicated staff time and dedicated fiscal resources.

### Mostly informal:

**Identifying stakeholders:** Research teams generally undertake a process of identifying relevant stakeholders according to their research agenda, and based on stakeholders' roles and influence in the community or at other levels (e.g., national level). Mapping or other planning tools are often used in this process to help identify sectors, groups, or individuals who may offer key insight. Initial or existing stakeholder relationships can open doors to new stakeholders and new strategies, building a stronger, more strategic network for achieving objectives. This activity will be described in detail, including adaptable tools, in Module 5.

**Community mapping:** This approach is used to identify existing resources and services in a geographical area, as well as key community stakeholder groups or individuals. It may overlap with activities processes described above in identifying stakeholders, but is specific to the local surroundings. It is often a key step for researchers in understanding how the term 'community' is defined by people connected the research — whether that be by geographic locale, common causes and interests, or other factors.

**Community forums:** This approach convenes interested community members to learn about and comment on proposed research activities. Community stakeholders can be engaged by helping identify times and locations, tools for publicizing a forum, language used to describe research approaches, and other similar aspects of forums.

**Literature search:** Literature searches can identify existing published information on a population, research approach, or geographic area, and allow researchers to benefit from previous experience. Sources of published information can include journal articles, newspapers, books, or historical archives. Stakeholders may be able to suggest specific resources that are particularly insightful.

### Can be formal or informal:

**Key informant interviews:** In-depth interviews can provide rich qualitative data around stakeholder ideas, norms, and perceptions, giving researchers an in-depth understanding of the population and context in which they will work. Community stakeholders can help identify topic areas for exploration, as well as appropriate interviewees.

**Accessing expert opinions/opinion leaders:** The practice of identifying stakeholders and community mapping might well reveal opinion leaders in a given community. It is good practice to build a relationship with key opinion leaders, through conversation, in-depth interviews, and when possible, inclusion on a formal feedback mechanism such as a Community Advisory Board (CAB).

**Focus groups:** Focus groups can offer broader data about stakeholder perceptions and norms. They can also help researchers understand issues such as the local population's willingness to participate in a trial and the availability and accessibility of research-related services (e.g. government health clinics, voluntary HIV counselling and testing centres). Stakeholders can help the research team develop focus group guides, identify focus group participants, and interpret data.

**Surveys:** A survey could help the research team collect broad information about existing knowledge and attitudes among target populations. Stakeholders can help formulate survey questions or identify methods for survey administration.

## **Formal:**

**Social/behavioural research:** This type of formal research is conducted according to approved, funded protocols to identify social, cultural, or behavioural aspects of a population. In the case of HIV-prevention research, this may include studies looking at risk-taking behaviour, risk perception, adherence-related behaviours, willingness to participate in a trial, and others. Stakeholders can help researchers identify research questions, how to design the study so that it is culturally appropriate, and other similar issues.

**Epidemiology-related studies:** These are formal studies conducted according to approved, funded protocols to explore clinical aspects of an epidemic. In the case of HIV-prevention research, this may include studies to measure HIV incidence or prevalence in a given population or community, modes of transmission, key risk factors, and others. Stakeholders can help researchers determine the best areas and methods of outreach in a community, as well as the perceptions of participants and of the community at large about the research.