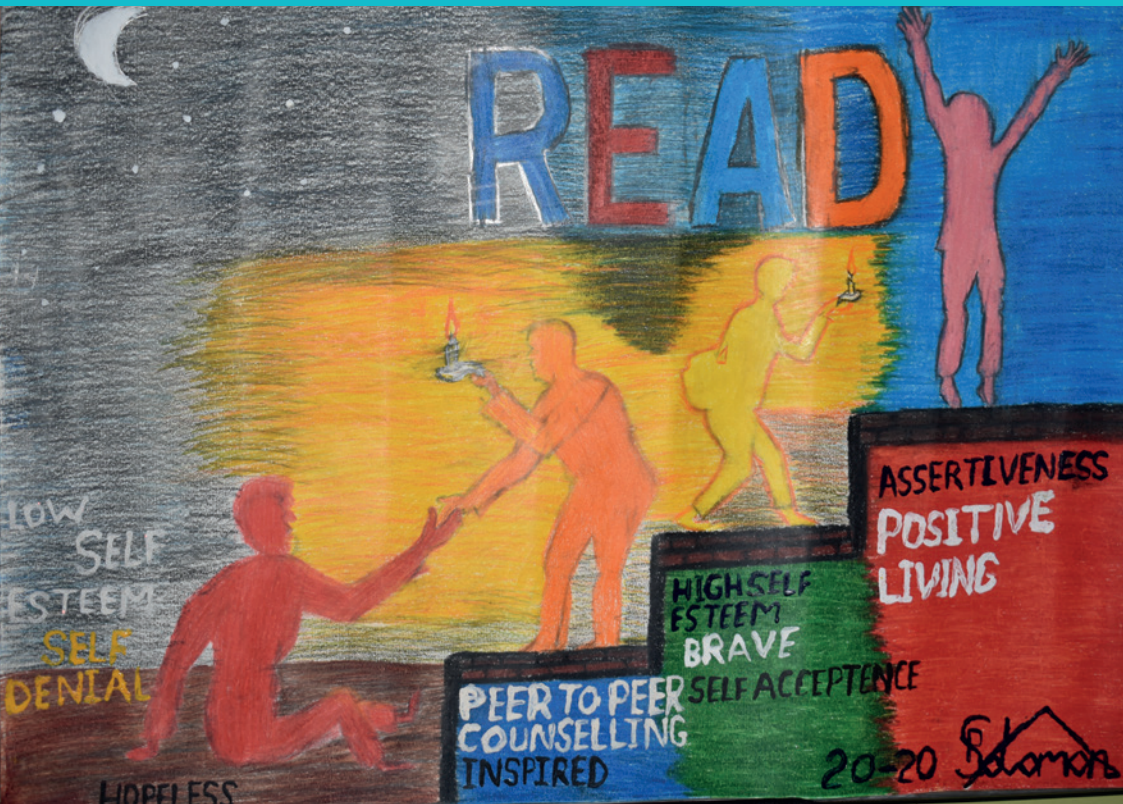


OUR JOURNEYS, OUR STORIES





Community Adolescent Treatment Supporters (CATS) have a pivotal – even revolutionary – role to play in supporting adolescents and young people living with HIV. They are at the heart of READY+ our peer-led work in eSwatini, Mozambique, Tanzania and Zimbabwe.

We're proud of what they do and who they are – resilient, confident and compassionate, empowering others with HIV to live a full life.





NTSIKY'S FOREWORD

Ntsiky was one of our early CATS and grew in the programme to become a vibrant advocate for young people living with HIV in eSwatini and beyond. Here she tells us how CATS helped her and how she went on to help others.

At first when I discovered that I am infected with HIV it wasn't easy at all because I had no one to talk to. Actually I just needed someone of my age to explain to me how you live with the infection and how I am supposed to take care of myself.

Life has been going well since I was part of the READY+ project as a CATS. Before, I used to stay alone because I felt like I don't want to be with other people and I had so much anger towards myself. As time goes, I started to accept myself the way I am. I have faced the situation and I live with it and with no regrets.

After becoming a trained CATS I started to be open to the world about my HIV status and now I am given platforms for motivational speaking, and give testimonials to my peers. I also featured on a video "The Sky's the Limit" on the roles of CATS which is empowering for other young people living with HIV. It also makes my work easier as an advocate because you can't be an advocate who is shy, but now I am a vibrant and bubbly young person who is proud to stand up for the rights and needs of young people and to ensure that the voices of the voiceless are amplified."

“I am Ntsiky Shabangu a young person, a teen mom and ex-CATS and READY+ focal point from eSwatini who is openly living with HIV for 4 years.”

***“READY+ imekuwa daraja katika maisha yangu
Kuvuka sehemu moja, kuelekea nyingine; hiyo ni hatua kubwa katika maisha yangu”***

***“READY + is a bridge in my life
To transcend from one place, to another; is a big step in my life”***

Like Ntsiky many CATS say they felt isolated and angry after their diagnosis. Others found their way to becoming a CATS after sexual abuse. Like the young woman who shared this experience. It's a story which is repeated across the countries where community adolescent treatment supporters work.

Often we hear that meeting a CATS, someone who shares the same experiences, is a transformational moment - ‘a bridge in my life’ - which leads to rebuilding self esteem and helping others do the same.

“One day when I was preparing to go to school I got raped by my uncle. He threatened to kill me if I told anyone about the incident. Therefore, I did as he said but I was dying inside, until one day when I managed to tell a stranger about what had happened then got helped to report the case

...then I had to find a way of leaving the house and not to come back. I fell in love with this guy and he did not tell me about his status, I had to find out about his status when I was pregnant. Life became difficult however I had to accept my status for the sake of the baby. A bit later on he told me that he is not going to marry a victim of rape.”

“...I met a young woman who was a CATS, she told me about support groups. I started to attend support groups from that day on and I realized I am not the only one living with HIV and being HIV positive does not mean the end of the world. Therefore I started to socialize and interact with others, healing took place. One day the Sister-in-Charge selected me to be a CATS.”

Here, in their own words, CATS share their individual journeys and the difference they have made.

THERE WHEN IT MATTERS MOST



Many of our CATS are the strong young people they are today because they got help when they needed it most. When the situation looked bleak, someone reached out. Our CATS are motivated to ensure that no one has to struggle alone and will continue to support their clients no matter what.



ometimes my peers think HIV means the end of their world. I managed to inspire another to the extent where she is achieving her goals and very soon she will be writing her final O level examination.

The main challenge I have faced is that sometimes peers do not want to talk to me about their status or what is happening to make them not cope on their treatment, I sometimes get wrong phone numbers and wrong addresses but I have all the patience, so I will keep following up on them to ensure they end up better on treatment and get the support they need outside their HIV treatment.

**“I learnt to be a hero and giant enough
no matter what the situation is”**



would like to thank the MMPZ¹ family for making me understand that it was not the end of the world and making me the girl I am today. I also regained confidence in talking with other youths and people older than me - I used to be shy addressing many people. Moreso, I managed to pay a private teacher who is helping me with the subjects I failed. I accepted my status and now it's easy to adhere well to ART therapy.



got to realize that children and adolescents need consistent support, coming from someone who is trustworthy and patient when they want to talk about their issues, and someone to provide loving care to them. There is a need to continue providing information support to my peers and the community surrounding them. I have come to appreciate all the effort I made in getting to know my peers because through playing with them, holding fun counselling sessions and probing questions I helped them to open up to me [about] their issues.

¹ Million Memory Project Zimbabwe (MMPZ)

THERE WHEN IT MATTERS MOST CONTINUED



raised money by saving my CATS stipend and I learnt to be a hero and giant enough no matter what the situation is and because of being a CATS I do not isolate myself. Now I have the mentality that I may be

poor but I should always aim for a better life. I want to thank Africaid and CATS because they counselled me about my situation and how to solve it and now I know who I am and my life is now going like waves because of counselling.



It was in 2006 when I tested positive, I was helpless and I had no information about HIV. By that time I was facing stigma and discrimination at home, community and at school. I ended up stigmatizing myself, at school I had no confidence even to talk to my school mates. In 2009 I met Zvandiri CATS and a Zvandiri mentor Aunt Elizabeth Gwenzi. They gave me hope to live again by giving me information on how to cope with stigma and different information about HIV, I always attended the support group which made me stronger and that is when I realized that life is easy when you have someone who supports you.



As an introvert I have never been one to provide social support let alone psychological support itself. But as a CATS I have come to know how psycho-social support is important to young people living with HIV. It was during a successful session with a suicidal client that I realised I could provide psycho-social support but also how it can make a big difference in someone's life.

LEADERSHIP



LEADERSHIP CONTINUED

Using their knowledge of what other young people may be facing, our CATS are able to give guidance and inspire others to accept their HIV status and live a full life. The training our CATS go through helps them build their confidence and, where once they might have shied away from a crowd, they are now happy to talk to an audience of young people knowing that their message changes lives.



I want to change how young people living with HIV see themselves in a negative way by teaching and encouraging them to love and accept themselves and live their own life so that the world can see there is no difference between a person who is HIV negative and HIV positive besides what is in the blood... because we all can do the same things then I believe all stigma can go away. THAT'S MY STORY AND I'M STICKING TO IT.



My greatest achievement as a CATS happened in October 2019 and I remember it because it is the year I was chosen to be one of the Zvandiri program CATS. I learnt a lot of things, I now help my peers who need support since this was me back when I lost my mother, receiving support from my CATS. I have a goal to help so many of my peers and I'm in love with my work because if it wasn't for this opportunity I wouldn't have access to support. I learned to be humble and not to judge anyone concerning their life and to leave my beliefs when supporting my peers and try to understand what they want.

“It's like a game of chess”



The moment I commenced my duty as a CATS I saw that there are numerous sets of expectations young people want to see in a CATS which makes you qualify to win their hearts. Being a CATS is not as easy as window shopping but it's like a game of chess because there is much thinking of how you can help a client or how you will reach the target, and how you will get to overcome any obstacle in front of you. It is of paramount importance that we help our clients because they are an exquisite jewel and once you lose them it will cost a lot to get back on track. As a CATS I know I am human and sometimes will make mistakes and though I learn from them it hurts when you know you may have let down your clients when they had trust in you.



The success I had with **READY+** was [learning to] support other young people in the same situation. I also learnt how to manage my own money, and to help my family with the little I earn. The advice I give for other teenagers and young people is: **Discrimination is real and it happens in families, but you, youngster, you should be strong, you shouldn't give up, it does hurt, it is difficult, but by ensuring ARV is part of your life you can achieve everything you want and have a future.**

KNOWLEDGE IS POWER



KNOWLEDGE IS POWER CONTINUED

Many young people are frightened of being judged and this fear of stigmatization leads many to ignore or hide their HIV status. All of our CATS have had to overcome stigma, fear and discrimination to become the bold young people they are today. They use knowledge and information to break down the barriers of stigma and fear and help other frightened young people.



My parents were very much supportive to me, though some of my relatives discriminated against me because they thought I was nothing more than a dead person walking. They would also make jokes about me and talk bad about people living with HIV. I lost self-confidence, I was always having unanswered questions on my mind like “how did I get the virus, why me out of everyone at home,” and I also had anger towards my parents.

Ever since I have become a CATS, life is now simpler for me even my family members have gained knowledge from me they now understand me better. Being a CATS changed so many things in my life it made me realize the impression of one's life. Now I do not even think of killing myself like I used to. Also I now know the importance of medication and adherence.



In the interview I was asked a lot of questions like will you be able to stand in front of the adolescents teaching them about HIV and AIDS. I told them that I will be able to do so, but inside my heart was afraid because I was not given that kind of opportunity. I had no clue about HIV and AIDS. I then asked myself how will I teach them? We went to Gweru for a CATS training and we were taught about HIV and AIDS, the soldier game², how to conduct a home visit, counselling skills. Therefore, I started to have confidence about myself and being able to stand in front of people.



I live with my mom, and my dad passed away when I was three years of age. I was born HIV positive but I had no knowledge about it. I was able to know my status at the age of twelve and this did not go well with me and I started having suicidal thoughts. Back then I used to think someone who is positive cannot have life since my dad had passed on because he lacked knowledge. I later was able to be part of a support group and it really helped me a lot. I understood that I was not alone and that helped me understand my care and treatment.

² In Tanzania, peer supporters use the soldier game to educate young people living with HIV /AIDS about how antiretrovirals work in the body.

My greatest achievements as a CATS is that I have become someone who is happy living a positive life though it is not as easy. It takes a lot for someone to accept his/her status, I was someone who did not talk too much but nowadays I can freely say whatever is on my mind.

Another thing is when we meet as CATS I feel the oneness in us because we do not put ourselves in social classes, we are one. Sharing stories also makes me realize that I am not the only one who passed through hard times and it brings back my lost hope.

I now know who I am: Always tell yourself positive things [about] who you are, what you always see yourself as. I know who I am, I am the most beautiful girl in the universe, and I am other people's role model, the gorgeous lady who never gives up on something if she really needs it. I am that brave lady who doesn't have fear of anything and I always run my own race with God by my side. I am FIRST LADY MIMIE.

My parents died when I was 4. When I was 14 years old I started to get ill every time. My aunt took me to the hospital and I tested positive. After that day I got some adherence lessons together with my aunt. I then got selected as a CATS to get me out of my shell because I was very shy and passive. I used to isolate myself so that I could just sit alone. I personally achieved a lot of things as a CATS. I managed to go back to school and register for the subjects that I had failed before on my first O level exam. I also managed to do a short course in nursing. Lastly I got to generate a small business of selling groceries. I learnt that one should have perseverance in everything we do.

Before I was a CATS, my life had no meaning because I was criticized a lot by my father's family, I even considered abandoning my treatment but everything worked out in God's grace and I overcame everything so much that I don't even bear a grudge against my family now. I even have the strength to live and support others. Thanks to READY+ I learnt to deal with my problems, I learnt to be humble and to how to forgive. I will never forget the support I had from the CATS, at both the Hixikanwe Association and ADECC³. They are like brothers to me.

³ Hixikanwe and Associação para o Desenvolvimento da Capacidade Comunitária (ADECC) are implementing partners in Mozambique.

OVERCOMING CHALLENGES



Sometimes just getting through the day can be difficult for our CATS who continue to face discrimination and the challenge of just keeping going when they themselves may feel worn out. They do it because they care about the people they are trying to help. They are motivated to overcome challenges because they know that their work and their patient approach saves lives.



Before I became a CATS I had little knowledge about HIV and I was not happy to go and collect my medication. Whenever I hear people talking about HIV I would not say a word and inside I will be angry.

Some challenges I faced include being sick, being told to move out of the house - that made me feel like a reject - staying alone and being the one doing everything. If you come home tired you still have some house chores to do and you also have to study, believe me you it's frustrating.



Working with young people who do not adhere well to their medications is not easy, it takes a long time to convince a human being to do things that are for their benefit. Convincing the young people to go back on treatment and care is difficult as each one of them have their own

different reasons for defaulting from ART therapy. The other challenge I faced in my journey as a CATS is [being given] wrong phone numbers and wrong house addresses, this makes it hard for us when we want to do home visits checking on my clients. However, for each and every challenge we face we always find a keen way to solve our problems.



I do have challenges which are, working with the public is not easy, and this needs someone with a good heart, someone who is not short tempered, very patient. Sometimes our clients give us wrong addresses or phone numbers. When you meet with an adolescent and they open up to you about their issues, normally I refer for further support but sometimes the service providers do not support in time and it affects my work because the trust that my clients have in me is lost. Which makes me feel that I did not do enough to support them. The issue of death - losing adolescents when you have built a bond with them is hard.

OVERCOMING CHALLENGES CONTINUED



ou have to try to humble yourself and understand people. You mustn't be short tempered because I have faced many clients who sometimes come off as rude and some who do not want the support you will be offering and sometimes they may have been told to come see me and they think they did not have a choice so they will put the blame on you - it is difficult to handle a person like that. There is sometimes an issue where you have to always be careful not to do accidental disclosure because it is my client's right to disclose. But I have learnt so much since becoming a CATS and I am loving my work.



faced the challenge of Covid-19, we were not able to visit our clients or support them. Though we phoned them but it was less effective, compared to home visit. I also faced a challenge of not having an identification like wearing something which shows my job description. Some parents were not comfortable with me talking to their daughters.

“It’s not easy, you need a good heart”



ome clients believed in what they were told at their churches more than what the doctors had said. It's not bad to have a belief in your church, but some clients would tell you that, "I was prayed for so I am healed. I do not need your medications"

I FELT DIFFERENT (HOW I FOUND OUT)



I FELT DIFFERENT (HOW I FOUND OUT) CONTINUED

For many young people, living with HIV can seem like a hopeless struggle and they feel as though their lives are over before they have even got going. Our CATS have been through this and they can help other young people to see that there is hope and a way to live a full and happy life.

I did not know where to start because the boy who impregnated me refused the pregnancy due to my HIV positive status. He said he can not have an infected baby.

I was hopeless, I had just told myself there is nowhere I am going. The thought of knowing that I was different from my peers made me have a distorted view of life. To me growing up with a responsibility of taking medication for a virus which was incurable was a waste of time, it was an immovable mountain of my life. The unanswered questions in my mind gave me frustrations and shame and I started defaulting my medications. Due to my ignorance I did not take my education seriously, moreover I resorted to hard drinking and fighting as a way of escaping from reality. Little did I know that I was worsening the situation.

“It was an immovable mountain”

I was born in Jan 1999, living with my parents when I was six years old my dad died and my mom went to South Africa. I began to live with my grandparents. In 2013 I became ill then my granny took me to the hospital where I tested positive and was initiated on ART. It was difficult for my granny to disclose to me so she decided that I should join support groups at the hospital. When I realized that I was HIV+ I had to endure mockery and hurt speech from my siblings at home and then I decided to be a sole trader. Fortunately Africaid was a great rescue in my life. My status contributed immensely for me to be a CATS and my willingness to disclose my status. I got recruited as a CATS and my eyes were opened, that is when I started to live a normal life.

Before joining READY+ I was someone who had no knowledge about HIV and no hope for the future. I spent a lot of time discriminating myself, I was not adhering and I had no plans to be happy. After getting to know READY+ everything changed, thank God, I had a lot of hope for my life and I realized that I can have a happy life with a better future, as long as I comply with the medication. I met a new family who are the CATS, brothers in the same situation as me who have always been there to pick me up, strengthen and give me unconditional support. I gained a lot of knowledge and strength to help teenagers and young people become resilient and empowered.

DISCLOSURE, WHEN AND HOW?



DISCLOSURE, WHEN AND HOW? CONTINUED

For many of our CATS it took years to discover their HIV status and sometimes an equally long time to disclose it to others. Our CATS help young people work through this and show that disclosure can be empowering, setting an example for others who might still be afraid.



When I was at 6 years my parents passed away and I started staying with my grandmother. The time my parents passed away the situation at home got serious because I was sick. Sometimes I could not go to school. I used to develop painful wounds on my tongue and also body rash. All these incidents made me think I was bewitched, thinking the sickness got something to do with spirits. I used to go to different churches and different traditional healers for healing. At some point I could sit alone thinking 'when am I going back to school and play with other kids?' One day my aunt came home and she noticed that I was not feeling well, it was easy for anyone to notice my sickness because I had lost so much weight. Therefore, my auntie had to take me to the clinic. When we arrived at the clinic, I got help with immediate because the nurses situation could see I needed immediate assistance. The very same day I was referred to Chitungwiza central hospital then I got admitted there. The day after I was admitted the other doctor came to where I was sleeping and he told me that I must get tested for HIV he then explained more about HIV. I tested HIV positive then I was counselled by the doctor. Honestly it was hard for me to believe that I am HIV positive. The CATS are the ones who used to visit me and they are the ones who encouraged me to adhere well to medications. Hence, I started to look healthy and I had to go back to school.

**“My eyes were opened.
I started to live a normal life”**



uring the first term I got seriously ill then I went to the hospital and I was told I had kidney problems. I kept on getting sick but there is a time I got really sick and I was taken to the hospital then I tested HIV positive.

When I received the news I acted normal because I did not want my sister to think that I did not take the news well. After that I got registered for support groups. My life changed after I heard the news, I lost weight and I was unhappy, I had a lot of questions to ask my grandmother but I did not want to stress her with that issue. Two years later, I started taking my medications and attending support groups, I enjoyed going there because they would give us maheu⁴. I also went for viral load testing and my viral load was high. Truth be told luck was not on my side, after viral load testing, I got TB. I was referred to another at Chitungwiza Central Hospital. When I got to the hospital, I bumped into two nurses and they started asking about my love life, they even asked if I was sexually active.

In 2020 I went for an interview at Zvandiri, I passed then I went for training and started working as a CATS. Disclosure is one of the challenges that I faced, I did not want my boyfriend's mother to know that I am HIV positive.



roudly living positive: Back then when I was not a CATS, I was a young person living with HIV, the one who did not even wanted to disclose her status to anyone fearing that I might be discriminated from others. Now I am able to accept it everywhere.



fter several facilitations, covering the topic of the importance of disclosure, I was motivated and aware of being able to reveal my status to my boyfriend. The next day I arrived at the training with the true look of someone who was calmer and happier, and ended up telling the group that I had now revealed my status to my boyfriend and that he acted normally and will give me all the support I need. This was yet another story of the impact of psycho-social support on the importance of disclosure to a partner.

⁴ a maize drink

MY LEGACY – THE LASTING IMPACT OF THE PROGRAMME





y life has greatly changed because now I am a mother to a beautiful daughter who is negative and I am so lucky and proud to give birth to a healthy baby girl. And through the project I was able to learn what to do and how to cope as a teen mother.

After joining this family, I learnt the importance of treatment and started doing everything possible to take the medication without fail (every day and at the same time). After a while I did my viral load tests and my viral load is undetectable. Thanks to READY+ I was able to reveal my HIV status to my partner, my friends and other members of my family, thank God they support me and are very present in my life.



mong [my] clients there were three young mothers who were pregnant and they have managed to start on their ART medication. They also engaged on the PMTC program (Prevention of Mother to Child Transmission).

When I started working the number of clients who had high viral load reduced. This was achieved with the support groups and home visits hence some now have an undetectable viral load. I achieved this by asking the clients what time they took their medication then I would call or text them 10 minutes before just to remind them. I would also ask for their review dates and remind them the day before. I also managed to distribute HIV self-test kits and get in contact with those who tested positive and refer them to their nearest clinics so they got initiated under the ART program. Personally am glad to say through counselling sessions they got to accept their status and I believe working as a team we can fight HIV.

“HIV is not in mind but in blood”



[y client] and her husband are happy as they all have the positivity to plan their family. They plan to adhere to family planning so that they give the space for their child to grow healthier and they have more time to engage in other productive activities and develop their wellbeing.

After being introduced to CATS at the facility, I started a journey that I can only define as the ‘Discovery Journey’. I started learning why it was good to mix and meet new people of my age. I then learnt that I was not alone, many young people were being identified each and every month. I started to have an interest in what CATS were doing, so I resolved to volunteer at every support group. I became more knowledgeable on the CATS model and the Zvandiri mentor selected me because of my passion and love for Africaid Zvandiri programs. My greatest achievement is that I have learnt that HIV is not in mind but in blood therefore I can become whoever I want without being limited by my HIV status. I enrolled for tertiary education and I am now studying Developmental Studies at Zimbabwe Open University.

WHAT WE WOULD DO BETTER NEXT TIME



YOUR SUPPORT

We're proud of what was achieved for young people living with HIV

We want you, our supporters, to feel proud too, because we know we can't do anything without your support. So, as well as all the good things, here are a few of the things our CATS said we could do better. With your continued support we can better help more young people - and perhaps more importantly help them help others.

In future I would want the family members and community members to be trained on the aspect of care and being able to help and empower people living with HIV. Also, I would want people who are living with a disability as well as HIV and are given fair and equal opportunities like everyone in society and taking stigma to 0%. I would also want my clients to have access to quality education, food and clean water because if they fail to access these it affects them emotionally and psychologically. Lastly, I would want my clients to have easy access to treatment and treatment for secondary infections which would increase life expectancy and quality of life.

“I want people who are living with a disability as well as HIV given fair and equal opportunities”

Sometimes we do not have spaces to do the counselling sessions and it would not be proper to hold those outside for lack of privacy. For patients on second line drugs, usually we experience shortages in the country which is a bad thing. Use of e-support groups can be a challenge for those without a smartphone.

Iwould love to see strengthening of activities so that teen mothers and key population groups can be included in the programme.

We also have young people living with a disability whom we fail to reach with information because we do not have training to cater for them.

WHAT WE WOULD DO BETTER NEXT TIME CONTINUED



ommunication barrier is another challenge that I usually face at work. Sometimes I encounter young people with hearing problems or even deaf. Personally, I do not know how to talk using sign language. At the end of the day, I fail to pass my intended message to that person.



oor network connectivity was causing my clients to give up on getting information they needed because of late replies from my end. The other [challenge] is when you have a client who needs assistance with school fees, organizations who support this are sometimes difficult to find.

Once Covid-19 is over it would be great to start awareness campaigns in schools so that we can stop the spread of HIV, and minimize stigmatization in communities.



wish we could be provided with IDs to identify us as CATS and bicycles for transport since our area is too big.

Enrichment in knowledge is one of my desires. I am planning to go for counseling courses so that I can do my work properly.



just pray that the programme continues as there are many teenagers and young people who need our support and whom without us only God knows what can happen to them.

THANK YOU

To our legendary supporters, partners, staff, volunteers and the incredible young people who stood up to help other young people. CATS are amazing because of you.

Our reach: over four years, we reached 23,971 young people living with HIV with peer-led services.

Our impact: as a direct result of our work 75% of young people reported that they were satisfied with the quality of HIV and SRHR services provided to them within the health facilities and communities.

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READY+ aims to advance sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), psychological wellbeing, care and treatment with, by and for 30,000 adolescents and young people living with HIV in Mozambique, eSwatini, Tanzania and Zimbabwe. The programme is being implemented by an innovative and multi-disciplinary consortium of youth, SRHR, HIV and communication partners.

READY+ is one of a portfolio of projects being implemented under the READY programme. For more information, visit <https://frontlineaids.org/our-work-includes/ready/>



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