
Partnerships in HIV/AIDS

Care and Education

If there is one thing that we have learned after living more than twenty years with the reality of HIV/AIDS, it is that all of society must be involved in mitigating the effects of the disease. This lesson is starting to be put into effect in quite a few countries in Africa. As a result, partnerships between NGOs, CBOs and faith communities to prevent and combat HIV/AIDS are being established in various countries. HACI (Hope for African Children Initiative) is one such partnership.¹ The three articles which follow show the usefulness of such partnerships in topping up initiatives often already begun by faith communities or women's groups but which—on account of the enormity of the challenge posed by the disease—frequently fall short of meeting the needs of the people infected and affected.

Choosing Life

The impact of HIV/AIDS is so big that communities can no longer cope. Children are being orphaned at an alarming rate and poverty fuelled by the epidemic is quickly engulfing our communities," says Osunga Kuyoh, the coordinator of Sirembe Child Development Program, a community-based organization assisting children and families impacted by HIV/AIDS in North West Gem location of Siaya District in western Kenya.

Recent statistics from Sirembe mobile VCT, supported by Centre for Disease Control (CDC) indicated the HIV prevalence rate in North West Gem was 23%, compared to the national rate of 6.7%. "This figure is pretty high and signals worse things to come. It means many more children are on their way to orphanhood as infected adults die from the disease," he says.

But beyond the grim statistics is a resolute community initiative to ward off the negative impact of the disease. Through the Sirembe Child Development Program, residents of North West Gem have come together to support children made vulnerable by the disease and carry out HIV prevention campaigns. The organization, sup-

ported by HACI through Save the Children Canada, has also set up HIV/AIDS clubs in 12 schools. "School children provide a window of opportunity in the war against HIV/AIDS because if they are educated about the epidemic at an early age, they will grow up armed with all the information required to prevent it and will be able to make the right choices," says Osunga.

At nearby Sirembe Secondary School, students and teachers have benefited from an HIV/AIDS awareness club dubbed "I choose Life" set up jointly by the organization in conjunction with the University of Nairobi's Christian Union Group, the Navigators. The Club provides the students with information on HIV/AIDS and encourages them to use voluntary



counseling and testing (VCT) services.

According to the club's patron, Mrs. Emily Roche, the program is a success, with more than 90% of the students having used the VCT services. "Attitudes have also changed and students talk about issues of sexuality openly. During club meetings, they ask questions and most myths and misconceptions surrounding the disease are dispelled," she says.

Dennis Odhiambo, the club's chairman concurs. He now talks openly about issues, which were considered a taboo before. "The most effective arsenal against HIV/AIDS is information, which most students in my school now have," he says.

Every Wednesday afternoon, the students converge to talk about their survival in a world with HIV/AIDS. "We talk about everything, ranging from ordinary sexually transmitted diseases to HIV/AIDS," says Dennis, adding that people outside the school too are benefiting from the club. "When we go out, students from other schools ask us about the club and we always take the opportunity to teach them about HIV/AIDS."

Recently, Dennis lost his childhood friend to the disease. "If I knew then what I know now, maybe I would have saved my friend's life," he says. However, he knows there is no time to waste and is passing on vital messages to the youth.

In addition to the HIV/AIDS prevention campaign, Sirembe Child Development Program provides support, including furniture and books to schools in the area. At Sirembe Primary School, it put up toilet facilities for girls recently.

Precious Memories

Although Philip Otieno Jera, 65, is not HIV-positive, he has embarked on writing a memory book. The project, initially designed for people living with HIV/AIDS to record their family history and events to help their children understand their lineage, is gaining popularity among Pandipieri Catholic Center's volunteers and beneficiaries, with 254 books already completed and 678 being written. "The memory book project is good for both the infected and the uninfected. No one can live forever and it's important that we leave something behind for our children to learn from our treasure," says Jera, a volunteer

"If I die now, my children will not fight over my property, neither will anyone snatch it away from them."

at the Center.

Mr. Jera has already recorded events surrounding his life: from childhood, his job as a welder in Uganda, to the time he got married. He has also written about his parents, wife and eight children, in addition to writing a will. "If I die now, my children will not fight over my property, neither will anyone snatch it away from them. It is all in black and white. Before, I didn't know the importance of succession planning and memory books. But the training I received from Pandipieri has been an eye opener. Wills not only lessen tensions when one dies, but also ensure children's right to inheritance are respected," says Jera.

According to the Pandipieri Catholic Center Program Coordinator James Adede, encouraging people who are not infected with HIV to write memory books helps fight stigma. "Whenever one was seen writing a memory book, he/she would be suspected of being HIV-positive, which led to stigmatization. But by getting the uninfected to write the book, we



Mr Jera setting off on his rounds

stand a big chance of reducing discrimination which stalks people living with HIV/AIDS,” he says

“The book,” he adds, “plays a critical role in addressing the family’s emotional needs.

Through it, family members are able to express their fears and other concerns they find hard to talk about. In some cases, parents have used the book as a means of revealing their HIV-positive status. Indeed, it acts as a pointer to family members’ individual emotional and psychological needs. That is why counseling and memory book writing go hand-in-hand. We want to continuously address people’s psychological and emotional needs.”

As a volunteer, Mr. Jera educates the community about the memory book initiative and the dangers of

cultural practices like wife inheritance and polygamy, which he says, are to blame for many HIV infections in the area. “Some people just inherit widows without finding out what might have killed their husband. In some cases, the widow may not be HIV-positive but the person inheriting her is, meaning he may transmit the virus to her. This practice is a danger to both the inheritor and the inherited and must be discouraged at all costs,” he says.

During public meetings, funerals and church services, Jera talks about HIV/AIDS. On certain occasions, he participates in vernacular radio programs teaching the public about the disease.

Supported by HACI through Save the Children, Pandipieri

Catholic Church Center runs HIV/AIDS programs in low class areas of Kisumu town in Western Kenya. Services include health, HIV/AIDS awareness campaigns, counseling and testing, formation of post-test clubs, memory book writing, establishment of school AIDS clubs and income generation activities.

Taking HIV/AIDS Messages to the Hearing-Impaired

Peter Osano, a volunteer at the Nyaweri Voluntary Counseling and Testing Center in Kisumu in Western Kenya, knows the importance of teaching the deaf and hearing-



The VCT Center for the Deaf

impaired people about HIV/AIDS. Some of his friends, he says, have died of AIDS due to lack of information on how to prevent the disease. "For a long time, deaf people were not included in the HIV/AIDS awareness programs. As a result, many were infected with the virus because they did not know how to protect themselves. Some died without being tested," he says, through an interpreter.

Peter, himself deaf, blames inadequate knowledge of sign language and lack of interpreters for limited knowledge of HIV/AIDS among deaf people. "Even within a family set-up, communication is a big challenge and sometimes deaf people are left out because of lack of knowledge of sign language, leaving them marginalized and cut off from day to day activities," he says.

HIV/AIDS, he says, affects everyone and people with special needs should be included in treatment, awareness and other programs targeting HIV-affected individuals. "We are also affected by HIV/AIDS like everybody else and should be included in programs that mitigate the impact of the disease."

According to Peter, deaf people are disadvantaged because of limited life opportunities. "They often slip through the safety net due to limited access to education and other social services. As a result, many often find themselves at the bottom of the social ladder," he says.

Some, he says, have turned to prostitution for survival. However, he says lack of knowledge makes them vulnerable to infection. "Poverty has pushed some

deaf women to the streets where they engage in prostitution. However, they know little about how they can protect themselves from HIV infection."

Peter is among 12 deaf volunteers trained by Pandipieri Catholic Center, with the support of HACI and Save the Children, on peer education and community mobilization. Together with nine other volunteers, he runs Nyaweri VCT Center, the only one of its kind in western Kenya.

Since the Center was established in September 2004 with the support of Liverpool VCT, Care Kenya and Pandipieri Catholic Center, Peter has seen the number of clients increase from three to between eight and ten daily. "Sometimes we get up to 15 people, some of whom are not deaf, coming to our Center. Although high demand makes it difficult for us to attend to all the clients, it is a sign that people are beginning to recognize the role of VCT services in the fight against HIV/AIDS. They want to know their status and take control," he says.

Forty Pandipieri volunteers are learning sign language with a view to strengthening HIV/AIDS services among deaf people. "We want our volunteers to work with all clients, whether hearing-impaired or not. And that is why they are learning sign language," says James Adede, Pandipieri Program Coordinator.

In December 2004, 30% of clients tested at the Center were HIV-positive. "Although we counsel clients before we do the tests, some break down when they learn that they are HIV-positive. So we take time to comfort and counsel them," says Peter, adding that lack of interpreters and low literacy levels among deaf people, due to limited

number of schools catering for the hearing-impaired, have conspired to deny them information they need to protect themselves and their families from HIV/AIDS.

Note

¹ Concerning HACI see also the article on p. 2.

About 90% of women and men feel that a woman is justified in refusing to have sex with her husband if she knows he has an STD, while around 80% feel that a woman is justified in asking her husband to use a condom if he has an STD.

Kenya Demographic and Health Survey, 2003.