

YOUTH LEAD THE WAY IN FIGHT AGAINST HIV/AIDS

The number of anti-aids youth clubs is growing fast in Ethiopia. In Jijiga, Somali Region, songs, drama and poetry are used to fight stigma, discrimination and ignorance



Anti-Aids Youth Club in Jijiga selecting poetry for this day's mini-media production

“Lightning we call it. It can strike anyone, anywhere.” With a clear voice 12-year-old Ibrahim recites his poem to the crowd of people standing next to him. “Lightning can destroy buildings and trees,” he continues, “and leave anyone alone in the world.” As one of the more than 1.2 million children in Ethiopia orphaned by AIDS the boy speaks with authority.

Ethiopia has one of the largest infected populations in the world and the number is increasing rapidly. Children and youth, especially girls, are the first victims when HIV/AIDS strikes. Over 200,000 children are living with the

virus and many more have lost relatives and friends due to the disease.

But they are also the country's greatest hope for defeating the pandemic. In Jijiga, where one in five is infected with the virus, youth have taken the leading role. In less than one year the number of anti HIV/AIDS youth clubs has tripled.

“Young people are starting to see this as their own problem. Now that the disease is knocking on everyone's door we are finally taking responsibility,” said Aswan Abdi, a young peer counselor teaching at a youth workshop on HIV/AIDS prevention organized by UNICEF and SCUK.

“Even a young child can tell you the basic facts about the disease. But misconception still exist, however, and it is important that we keep repeating our messages.”

Clear messages are coming from 12-year old Ibrahim and his friend twice a week. They write their own poetry, based on own experiences, and “broadcast” it in both Amharic and Somali languages through loud speakers hanging from trees around their neighborhood. Most youth clubs in town have their own mini-media productions and their voices can be heard on most street corners.

“Only young people know what young people thinks,” said Hassan Sheik Dahir, young coordinator for United Youth Anti Aids Community Center, an umbrella for all the youth clubs in Jijiga.

It was founded in 2002 after a national youth forum on HIV/AIDS and now has over 1,800 members, half of them female. With UNICEF support the alliance produces culturally adapted information materials and organizes major activities involving all youth clubs in town. Recently the alliance was able to attract more than 500 young people to an event at the local stadium.

“When young people here about HIV/AIDS in words of their own the information doesn’t just go into one ear and out of the next. They bring their knowledge home and help spread awareness on the disease, prevention measures, treatment and care and support possibilities.”

UNICEF has helped set up the majority of the more than 230 anti HIV/AIDS youth clubs in Ethiopia’s Somali Region. An effective way to reach adolescents is to help them play an active role in prevention campaigns. Involving young people in prevention efforts not only educates them about HIV, but also gives them a sense of responsibility and pride.

With the right skills and knowledge, young people can have a positive influence on their peers. And because they speak the same language and share the same experience, young people are likely to speak more freely and openly among themselves. Dedicated young people in Ethiopia show that they are up to the challenge.

“Young people don’t stop in the street to read a banner they don’t understand. But they listen to the music and the lyrics,” said Ibrahim, member of WABARI, a youth club with 45 members. The club, established in 2000 as one of the first in town, has been particularly successful in addressing young people with their rhythmic music and strong messages.



WABARI, a rhythmic anti-aids youth club, performing at a youth workshop in Jijiga

More than 23 songs, performed whenever there is an audience, touch upon themes such as prevention, stigma and friendship. UNICEF has funded the members’ music instruments and loudspeakers, but the band is still short on other necessities such as transportation.

“We want to play everywhere, also in rural areas, where very few people know about the disease. But what we do now is to put our piano and mixer on our backs and walk as far as we can.”

Challenge remains, especially concerning stigma. In spite of the strong youth mobilization in town, HIV/AIDS is still taboo in many homes. Cultural barriers remain. In Somali Region the use of condom is estimated to be as low as 0.5% and female genital mutilation, a main source of transmission in rural areas, is accounted to be 99.7%. Also, the youth mobilization and strong impact has been in urban areas - not rural areas, where the vast majority of the population lives.

“Most people say that AIDS does not concern them. When we visit a family we have to make a short story very long in order to keep their attention. If we start preaching about aids they will throw us out,” said Hassan Ali, general manager of a former anti-AIDS youth club, now called Ubah Anti Ignorance and Rural Development Organization.

The organization offers presentations to the community about HIV/AIDS on an old blackboard in their office and has 45 members, who regularly arrange house-to-house visits.

Hope Jijiga Youth Association, another youth club, is rehearsing intensively for a performance in the local cinema. 600 people are expected to see their performance about “Betty and her boyfriend” who are confronted with a possible HIV-positive result.

“Our show will last almost one hour. People really want to here about HIV/AIDS,” said Zerihune Berega, chairman of the club. “It just has to be presented in the right way,”

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