

CÔTE D'IVOIRE

Overcoming HIV/AIDS with the community, a fight for life

Thirty-year-old Bernadette Gouéhi, a volunteer in charge of community mobilization to prevent mother-to-child transmission (PMTCT) of HIV, attends the weekly meeting for public awareness agents conducted by the non-governmental organization IDE-Afrique (Development Initiative-Africa).

Holding her eight-month-old daughter in her lap, she sits on a bench among her colleagues and listens attentively to the instructions given by Coordinator Clementine, a 40-year-old woman with contagious dynamism.

“During the group discussions or during private visits, we sensitize young girls and women – pregnant or not – on HIV/AIDS issues. We explain the risk posed by HIV and the need to get tested before and during pregnancy in order to avoid transmitting the virus to the baby,” explains Bernadette, as she tells us about her community sensitization activities. She fully supports the programme and accomplishes her mission with bravery and great motivation. She knows what she is talking about – she is HIV-positive.

Bernadette recalls, “I tested HIV-positive when the IDE public awareness agent suggested that I take the test in line with their PMTCT programme. After this painful experience, I decided to become a public awareness volunteer for the NGO. My health status permitting, I go round sensitizing the women in the village.”

The majority of women who deal with community mobilization at IDE-Afrique are HIV-positive. This is also the case of Clementine who, despite her status declared six years ago, is still active under the PMTCT programme.

It is with UNICEF's financial, material and technical support that IDE-Afrique carries out its activities in the area of community mobilization and offers care and support to children orphaned by AIDS and to other vulnerable children in the 18 Montagnes region.

When the conflict lays the bed of disease...

This western region of Côte d'Ivoire was seriously affected by four years of conflict. It has been the venue of frequent atrocities, sexual abuse and violence – mainly against women and children.

“The conflict has aggravated the health situation of the region. The city of Man has virtually no structures to provide medical care and to support the people infected or affected by HIV/AIDS. This makes it difficult to have access to quality

primary health care,” declares the Director of IDE-Afrique, Albert Seu, before adding, “there is also frequent shortage in the supply of antiretroviral drugs and HIV testing kits to the regional health districts.”

Bernadette left school very early due to lack of resources. A low level of education and a precarious health status are major obstacles for her to engage in any income-generation activity. Like many uneducated women in rural regions, she depends on the income of her husband and, consequently, on decisions taken by the latter. “I depend financially on my husband who is a farmer. With what he earns, it is not easy to feed the family every day, and even less to pay for my medication,” explains Bernadette.

The meagre income of rural populations in the 18 Montagnes region makes it difficult to provide care and support to people living with HIV/AIDS. Although the national average population can afford the cost of antiretroviral drugs (some CFA 1,000 per month), for these villagers it often represents more than half of the monthly family budget.

A ray of hope

Among countries in West and sub-Saharan Africa, Côte d'Ivoire is the most affected with an alarming HIV prevalence rate of 4.7. UNICEF will, as from 2008, support the purchase of antiretrovirals to the tune of US\$ 5 million thanks to the UNITAID project (tax on air tickets). “The drugs will go directly to the health districts to ensure that patients have easy access to the treatment,” announces UNICEF’s Dr. Jean Konan during a sensitization session at IDE-Afrique.

This represents a ray of hope for Bernadette and her colleagues. “This, for me, is another reason to pursue the fight. We shall put an end to HIV/AIDS in the 18 Montagnes region,” says Bernadette with a broad smile on her face.