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UNICEF Somalia Newsletter

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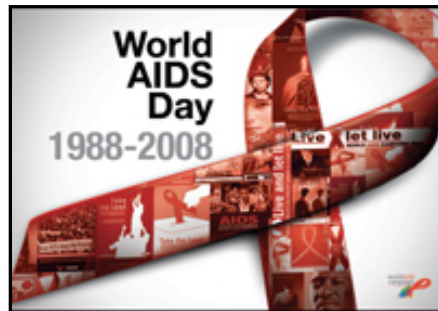
Uniting against AIDS, uniting for Somali children

The 1st of December 2008 was the 10th anniversary of World AIDS Day. The commemoration of the Day began in 1998 when health ministers from across the world agreed to identify a specific day to demonstrate the importance of HIV and AIDS and join people in solidarity towards a comprehensive response to the global epidemic. Across Somalia, UNICEF joined forces with local NGO partners and AIDS Commissions to highlight the important gains made in recent years to stem the rise and impact of HIV and AIDS. The event also reminded us of the important work that must still be done.

'Leadership' was the focus for World AIDS Day in 2008, building on the campaign slogan: "**Stop AIDS. Keep the promise.**" In Somalia, we have seen extraordinary leadership in the HIV and AIDS response. Political leadership was evidenced in the establishment of the three subnational AIDS Commissions in 2006 and 2007, marking an important step towards reaching the goal of universal access to comprehensive prevention programmes, treatment, care and support by 2010. Community leadership has been demonstrated by Somalis through the powerful response of people working in their villages to lead effective and sustained programmes aimed at raising levels of awareness

among young people and children.

Women's leadership can be seen in the networks that are reaching out to conduct home visits and host community forums to educate others and promote access to



services. Youth leadership has shown exciting progress as more and more young people have joined the HIV and AIDS response by developing multimedia campaigns and breaking down barriers in order to openly discuss the disease and participate in lifeskills programmes aimed at improving their leadership abilities.

Within the current climate of instability, continued conflict and economic vulnerability, the leadership shown in the AIDS response in Somalia highlights the ability of the Somali people to show solidarity towards a common goal and join

hands in reversing the spread and impact of the epidemic. UNICEF is privileged to work alongside nearly 40 partners in this effort. It is the children of Somalia who will ultimately benefit from this partnership as we unite for children against AIDS.

Somalia is fortunate to have the strong commitment of the Global Fund to fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria (GFATM) which provides predictable and multi-year funding to combat the disease. This puts Somalia in the enviable position of having major resources allocated towards the fight against HIV while the epidemic is still relatively small - giving the country a far greater chance of protecting its people and future generations.

Christian

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44,000 people estimated to be living with HIV/AIDS in Somalia

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There are currently an estimated 44,000 people living with HIV and AIDS in Somalia. The HIV prevalence rate in Somalia is slightly less than 1% but there is no room for complacency to attain the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) to combat HIV and AIDS by 2015.

Somalia faces a unique challenge in managing an adequate programme to combat HIV and AIDS amid an acute and prolonged emergency due to ongoing conflict and natural disasters. In this context, it is vital that special attention be paid to the vulnerability of women and girls, children and marginalized. The Declaration of Commitment on HIV/AIDS adopted at the 2001 UN General Assembly Special Session on HIV/AIDS (UNGASS) recognized the vulnerability of emergency affected populations. It called

for the development and implementation of national strategies that incorporate HIV awareness, prevention, and care and treatment elements into programmes and actions that respond appropriately and effectively to emergency situations. In the emergency context, the role of gender-based violence and its contribution to the spread of HIV and AIDS also needs specific focus.

Recognizing the unique challenges in responding to HIV and AIDS in Somalia, it should be noted that the HIV epidemic is affecting Somali populations differently in the three Somali zones (Northwest Somalia or "Somaliland", Northeast Somalia or "Puntland", and Central and Southern Somalia) and within the zones.

There is no sero-surveillance data to

assess prevalence levels in the general population or any of the populations considered most-at-risk to HIV infection. However, in the antenatal clinic (ANC) survey in 2004, relatively higher prevalence was reported from Somaliland (1.7%), followed by Puntland (0.5%), and Central South Somalia (0.3%). Co-infection with HIV among TB patients is estimated at 4.5%. Prevalence among patients with sexually transmitted infections (STIs) was 6.3% and was higher among men (7.4%) compared to women (5.4%). The ANC site in the port city of Berbera has shown a steady increase, with a prevalence of 0.0%, 2.3%, and 2.7% in the years 1999, 2004, and 2007 respectively. Other sites, in Puntland and Central South have demonstrated a similar trend.

The Woman-to-Woman network is key to fighting HIV at community level...

44,000 people estimated to be living with HIV/AIDS in Somalia

Given the diversity in prevalence and recognizing the vulnerability of certain groups within the emergency environment, and the commitments made by the UN and Government partners, UNICEF is working closely with women, youth, religious and traditional leaders and within health care centres to respond to the epidemic.

The current response to HIV prevention, treatment and care is driven by community based organizations. The involvement of women's groups through the Woman-to-Woman network remains one of the most effective responses to HIV and AIDS at a community level throughout Somalia. These networks provide peer education sessions, forums and home-based visits (see story "Women keeping the promise" on page 3 for details) This is undertaken parallel to sensitization work in collaboration with religious and traditional leaders to ensure a supportive environment that reduces stigma and discrimination whilst building skills for HIV prevention.

A long-term successful response to HIV and AIDS in Somalia would depend on increased community-based prevention programmes and working with young people as agents of change. Working with women's groups has strengthened the community-driven response and it is vital for such initiatives to be supported at the higher level by people such as religious leaders. The functioning of the subnational AIDS Commissions strengthens the policy and governance environment that these groups operate and efforts should focus on dialogue and coordination between the community-based groups and the governance structures. The people of Somalia have achieved many successes in responding to HIV and AIDS, but more needs to be done. Failure to address HIV and AIDS, even in what is considered a low prevalence country, will undermine the ability to achieve the other important Millennium Development Goals. HIV and AIDS can cripple the advancements made in improving maternal health and reducing child mortality. Somalia will not be able to respond to HIV and AIDS without pursuing the additional Millennium Development Goals to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger and promote gender equality and empower women. All groups and sectors should be involved in a coordinated and multi-sectoral response to HIV and AIDS. This is increasingly being achieved thanks to careful planning for HIV/AIDS work under the United Nations Transition Plan for Somalia and Consolidated Appeals Process targeting populations in need of humanitarian assistance.

The 'Write Stuff' - Challenging HIV and AIDS in Mogadishu



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"The moment I left the training, I was so empowered that I wanted to change many things at that particular time," says Safiyo Abubakar Karani (pictured left), a resident of Abudiasis district, Mogadishu. This was in 2005 after she had successfully gone through a training on HIV and AIDS and Gender organized by Health Unlimited, a UNICEF partner. At that time, 41-year-old Karani was writing stories on various social issues for *Bilan Newspaper*, which is published by the Somali Centre for Women Empowerment. The organization, which she now heads as its chairperson, provides skills such as computer operations, tailoring, handicraft, and business expertise to Somali women.

The *Bilan Newspaper* gives visibility to the gender dimensions of issues such as education, water and health. But one area that was not receiving a lot of focus was HIV and AIDS. "Even though the newspaper was giving some attention to the disease, the coverage was not regular, consistent and informative," Karani says. "The only idea we had about HIV and AIDS was reading a book we received from Kenya that tackles issues around the disease."

So after the training, Karani went back to her organization an inspired woman. She immediately wrote an article on why women are vulnerable to HIV. "The biggest problem I had was linking HIV and AIDS and gender in a manner that was convincing to the Somali women and men as well as government officials." "The training just made it possible to write a story from this perspective," she adds.

After the publication of this story, her organization held a meeting where they discussed how to cover HIV and gender issues on a consistent basis. It was then decided that a column focusing on HIV and AIDS be added to the newspaper. Through this column titled *Are You Accepting HIV/AIDS Exists*, the newspaper is able to tackle various issues related to gender and the disease. The column also provides a platform for Karani and other people to share their thoughts about the disease and how to tackle it.

Since the beginning of 2008, Karani, a mother of four, has written 11 articles on HIV and AIDS, and she is gearing up to do more before the end of the year. "My target is 20, and I just hope to realize this by the end of the year," she says. It is Karani's wish that the public be more receptive to efforts to raise awareness about HIV through her writing.

However, Karani fears that if the current trend of low sales continues, they might be forced to fold the *Bilan Newspaper*. Most of the time she has to use innovative ways to have the paper published. Because of the fighting in and around Mogadishu, the newspaper's main market, the sales of the newspaper decreased by 50% from 600 in 2007 to 300 in 2008. "We need financial and human resource support for us to continue producing this newspaper," she says with resignation.

What disappoints her most is these troubles are happening at the time when the community has just started being receptive to HIV and AIDS information. "Despite these problems, there is light at the end of the tunnel on other fronts," says Karani. "People are slowly accepting that HIV exists in Somalia and are willing to receive the messages. The future looks bright."

There is no room for complacency in the fight against AIDS in Somalia...

Women keeping the promise — Creating networks that deliver

The 'Woman to Woman Initiative' referred to as W2W is a network of women's organizations across Somalia that work with communities at a grassroots level to inform, educate and inspire other women to increase their knowledge on HIV and AIDS, promote leadership development among women and adolescent girls and promote access to prevention, treatment and care services. W2W also looks at issues around Sexual and Gender Based Violence.



A W2W facilitator from an NGO educates a group of women on HIV prevention in Merka © UNICEF Somalia/2008

The community facilitators of the W2W network focus on activities such as peer education, outreach and awareness forums and home visits. In 2008, the women's groups managed to reach 9,810 women and adolescent girls through peer education activities across Somalia. In addition, community-based forums on HIV and AIDS awareness were conducted, reaching 21,314 women and adolescent girls. So far, the women have managed to visit 5,089 homes reaching over 7,000 family members.

The extension of the project to include home-based visits has achieved remarkable results during its first year. During the home visits, the W2W facilitators have offered assistance to malnourished children and pregnant mothers, addressed and educated families on poor sanitation and good hygiene practices at household level, and referred women with children to immunization services.

The women from the Bay W2W network in Central Somalia recall a specific case of a woman who had lost her husband to an AIDS-related illness. She experienced growing isolation from her family and friends, was told to leave her hometown and she settled in Baidoa with her three children. She did not have access to medical treatment. The women from the W2W initiative immediately addressed the matter with her family members and friends. The woman underwent VCT (Voluntary Counseling and Testing) and was referred for ARV (Anti-

Retroviral) treatment in Merka. After various consultations with the woman and her family, she is now in a supportive environment and being cared for by her family. She will soon receive ARV treatment in Merka, made possible by supplies from UNICEF with funding from the Global Fund to fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria (GFATM).

In Puntland, Halima Mohamed Yusuf and Nasra Abdulahi are two of facilitators of the W2W initiative in Bossaso. During their weekly activities, they conduct HIV forums and home visits in the 100ka Bush IDP camp. During one of their visits, they went to the home of Maryan Mumin Mahad, a mother living in the IDP camp. Maryan also attended a community forum on HIV and AIDS. During a subsequent visit to Maryan's house, Halima and Nasra discussed the importance of HIV testing and the services offered at the Bosasso Hospital. Maryan, with the assistance of Halima and Nasra, decided to go for VCT. Maryan was impressed with the VCT services and also encouraged her friends to get tested.

The 100ka Bush settlement is one of the areas in which knowledge of HIV is very limited among the poor and vulnerable mothers and girls. However, the efforts of the W2W facilitators in providing correct information on HIV to mothers seem to be contributing to positive change in the perception of women regarding HIV prevention, care, treatment and support.



Young women participating in a peer education session © UNICEF Somalia/2008

Although these are only two examples of the work done by the W2W networks, there are many more women who have been reached through this initiative and whose stories are equally inspiring. The lives of thousands of women and girls have changed due to the hard work and dedication of a group of women that achieve incredible results for women and children within difficult circumstances. The leadership and courage shown by these women highlight that despite the increasing feminization of the epidemic, women remain one of the strongest allies in the response to HIV and AIDS.

No infant should have to die of AIDS given the knowledge available...

Achievements with Global Funds in Somalia - Facts and figures

Effective HIV and AIDS prevention, treatment, care and support programmes rely on facts. Communities including the young are taught the facts to reduce the risk of contracting HIV. UNICEF and its partners through advocacy initiatives teach tolerance and acceptance and promote access to various services associated with HIV.

Facts and figures are used to demonstrate how the epidemic is placing a burden on women and their development and how, if we do not act appropriately, our most valuable resource, our children, will die from a disease that is completely preventable and treatable. We also use facts and figures to plan - to try to stay ahead of the epidemic. Funding from the Global Fund against AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria (GFATM) is an important resource for joint planning and response to the HIV and AIDS epidemic in Somalia.

UNICEF plays a unique role as Principle Recipient of Global Funds for HIV/AIDS and with the Somalia Health Sector Committee, coordinates the work of 35 NGOs/partners, three UN agencies and three Government entities. The following paragraphs highlight the results achieved in 2008 through this partnership.

UNICEF and UNDP worked with 762 community, religious and political leaders to strengthen the leadership response to HIV and AIDS; through international and local NGO partners supported by WHO, a total of 3,307 health care workers were trained on integrated HIV and AIDS prevention, treatment and care; a total of 17 health facilities were supported to deliver medical services for HIV and AIDS including screening for Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs), treatment and Voluntary Counseling and Testing (VCT); through these facilities, 5,709 blood donors were screened and six health care facilities are currently providing advanced interventions for the prevention, treatment and care of HIV and AIDS. In addition, UNICEF continues to support health facilities that provide prevention of mother-to-child transmission (PMTCT) programmes and strengthen the referral of HIV+ mothers and their children to integrated prevention treatment care and support centers which provide antiretroviral treatment.

Additionally, WHO completed the HIV/syphilis sentinel seroprevalence survey among antenatal care attendants and STI patients in Central/Southern Somalia. The report will be available in December. Together with UNAIDS, International Organization for Migration (IOM) and WHO, a Somali HIV Behavioural Surveillance survey was initiated in 2008. The study is expected to be completed in January 2009 and will identify key HIV behaviours and prevalence among most at risk groups in the three zones of Somalia – Northwest, Northeast and Central/Southern.

As part of awareness efforts, 25,687 people were reached through community-based advocacy activities while peer group educators managed to reach 5,492 people through behaviour change communication (BCC) activities. These advocacy efforts resulted in 7,767 people accessing VCT services and currently 358 are receiving Antiretroviral (ARV) treatment and 2,616 are receiving treatment for opportunistic infections. A total of 14,943 people were diagnosed with STIs and are currently receiving appropriate treatment through health care facilities.

Over 2 million condoms were distributed through health facilities, pharmacies and community-based initiatives. In addition, 1,044 home-based care kits were distributed to people living with HIV through health facilities and 219 orphans and vulnerable children are receiving free basic support. Improvements in the skills of support group members have been witnessed in the areas of ARV, condom use, living positively with HIV and in reducing stigma and discrimination associated with HIV.



Young people in Mogadishu at a training session held by the Organization for Social Protection and Development, a local NGO in Somalia © UNICEF Somalia/2008

Young people were also targeted for HIV and AIDS education and 845 peer educators and teachers were trained. HIV and AIDS education was incorporated into 27 youth services and youth programmes through life-skill-based education.

Underpinning this work, HIV units were established in the Ministries for Family Affairs in each zone. The National AIDS commissions were supported to lead the coordination of the HIV response, to strengthen partnerships for a well-coordinated HIV response, to conduct regular supportive monitoring and supervision of partners in the HIV response and to strengthen the operational capacity of the Secretariats.

A UN General Assembly Special Session (UNGASS) Declaration of Commitment on HIV/AIDS review workshop for all GFATM partners was led by the AIDS Secretariats in Somaliland, Puntland and Central/Southern Somalia. The Secretariats conducted monthly working group meetings, regional advocacy workshops and national thematic conferences.

Whilst the focus was on strengthening the capacity of these government institutions, UNICEF also supported the capacity building of local NGOs on HIV and AIDS responses reaching a total of 28 civil society organizations and three People Living with HIV/AIDS support groups.

Local partners supported by the GFATM, celebrated World AIDS Day across Somalia. Activities included the dissemination of facts about HIV and AIDS laying emphasis on the importance of leadership that knows the facts, prioritizes people, promotes access to services, supports prevention programmes and puts children first to result in figures that show success in the HIV and AIDS response.

845 peer educators were trained in HIV/AIDS education...

Adolescents and HIV - Young people take the lead in response



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Four years ago, 23-year-old Abdiqani Hassan Moham (left) never imagined he would be editing a magazine about HIV and AIDS. The young journalist had long been interested in covering HIV and AIDS issues, but his attempts were limited by a lack of information on the disease.

“Every time I did an article on HIV and AIDS, there would be some complaints that made me reluctant to cover some of these stories,” says Abdiqani. Some fortuitous events, however, soon changed the situation. First, came an invitation to Abdiqani to attend a training event on reporting HIV and AIDS and Gender. The 2005 training took place in Hargeisa and was organized by the UNICEF-supported partner, ‘Health Unlimited’.

“At that time, I could barely define the words HIV and AIDS, and knew nothing about gender and how it is linked to this disease,” says Abdiqani, who was then a correspondent for Radio Bossaso. “The training introduced me to many issues and concepts around HIV and AIDS, and by the time it came to a close, I had this burning belief that this was something I could report on,” he adds. Immediately after the training, Abdiqani wrote a story for Radio Bossaso to test the response from the listeners - especially those who had criticized him. Their reaction was positive. From then on, he was congratulated whenever he did a story on this topic. He has never looked back. In the same year, UNICEF was looking for two young people to work as editors on a new youth magazine. Abdiqani applied and got the job. “That night I did not sleep. I wanted to call and tell everyone what had happened. I called and thanked a person named Shukri of ‘Health Unlimited’ for playing a big role in inviting me for the training,” says Mohamud still relishing that moment.

Known as ‘Koor’, the UNICEF-supported magazine on HIV and AIDS and Youth is an eight-page publication that comes out once every two months. Its articles are written by young people for young people and it is edited by young people across Somalia. Female Genital Cutting, HIV prevention, Gender and HIV/AIDS, and Poverty are just some of the issues covered in the magazine.

Along with a co-editor, Abdiqani collects stories written by young people and assesses them for quality and relevance for each edition of the magazine. From someone who knew nothing about HIV and AIDS, Abdiqani has developed into one of the most respected Somali journalists reporting on this issue. He now corresponds for the international news agency, Reuters, on various subjects including HIV and AIDS. In 2008, he prepared two radio programmes and wrote more than five stories on HIV and AIDS for the media outlets he works for. He also developed a comprehensive programme for World AIDS Day.

Abdiqani’s biggest challenge comes in having to respond to people who try to deter him from covering the subject by saying that HIV and AIDS does not exist in Somalia. On several occasions, he has even been accused of writing about a disease that does not exist in Puntland. “It is really hurtful,” he says.

But he thanks his parents for understanding the nature of his work and for their continued moral support. He gets his satisfaction when he sees his writings contribute to changing the perceptions of his people. Abdiqani says he would like to become an expert on the subject of HIV and AIDS so that that he can provide positive direction to his community. To do this effectively, he’s looking forward to attending refresher media courses on the disease and hopes one day to attend a global conference where he can interact and discuss the topic with international experts and journalists.

For more information on our programming or to learn how you can help, please contact us at:

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