

“Nothing for us without us” say young people at ICASA

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The 13th ICASA (International Conference on AIDS and Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) in Africa) Conference took place in September 2003 in Nairobi, Kenya. It became an exciting forum for young people to articulate their feelings and ideas about HIV/AIDS and about their commitment to an appropriate response.

Young people are an energetic and creative group of people, however these attributes have sometimes been labelled as signs of being irresponsible, ‘polluted’ or immoral citizens, who cannot take full responsibility of their actions. For at least the past 20 years, young people have often been deprived of the opportunity to articulate their needs with regard to HIV/AIDS and other sexuality issues. Much damage has been done; young people are calling for an end to this approach. They say that if HIV/AIDS concerns them (as it indeed does), then they must be involved - thus “nothing for us without us” was a buzz phrase among the young people attending ICASA.

Young people’s needs

The participation and involvement of young people in ICASA has shed positive light for both young people and key role players on the pressing issues that directly affect them. It was a platform for young people of the African continent to articulate their needs with regard to the many and varied challenges of care and treatment of HIV/AIDS and STI’s in Africa. It became clear that young people find resources and services inaccessible due to the nature of the services and the context within which they are provided. Examples related to service challenges include:

- Cost of services - young people often cannot afford payment for such services
- discrimination and stigma attached to the receipt of certain services
- negative attitudes of service providers towards young people
- inaccessibility of the services due to the location of such resources
- inconvenient working hours.

This was perceived as a main barrier to treatment and care of HIV/AIDS and STI’s particularly to young people.

Youth are generally the most affected, infected and disaffected group of the society. Thus the involvement of young people in all levels of decision making, implementation, monitoring and evaluation will not only provide direction to feasible and possible solutions to the pandemic but will empower young people with necessary and relevant skills in dealing with the challenges they face. Young people are the present and the future – however, to have the maximum impact the young people acknowledged that they need adults to prepare them today for future. This can be done by providing them with the opportunity to voice their opinions and empowering them with skills to deal with both the present and the future.

If given a chance young people can lead

For example, many young people in Nairobi during the ICASA event showed potential for leading the way when given a chance. Young people facilitated the Youth Forum throughout the process – this was something we were proud of. A night vigil and march commemorating young people who have died as a result of AIDS and in recognition and honour of those infected and affected by the disease in Africa were examples of initiatives that showed that young people have potential and that they only need guidance, opportunity, support and supervision from experts to facilitate their learning.

Young people's involvement and participation at the conference rewarded them with an opportunity to explore other potential causes of HIV/AIDS prevalence in Africa. One of the biggest issues that was raised in the Youth Forum was that HIV/AIDS had evolved to an issue beyond being just a health concern and that there were other contributing factors to the problem, such as the social context in which young people live in, and the political, economic and cultural forces in their environment.

Young people's solutions

Young people considered action processes and in response to the question 'what needs to be done?' were able to offer the following suggestions:

- Adequately prepare young people to articulate issues that directly affect them.
- Empower them with necessary skills to impart information e.g. writing skills, presentation at major events
- Equipping young people with life skills to prepare them to deal effectively with social, political, health and cultural challenges as these skills can be applied in all other challenges.
- While information is the key, the environment plays a major role in shaping the behaviour. Providing a safe and enabling environment can help young people to act on the information given.
- Challenging our cultures that continue to be static while the context we live in is dynamic. This can be achieved by incorporating local community role players in prevention programmes. It is necessary to assure them that it is not the culture that is challenged aggressively and without respect, but that culture should be conversant with the dynamism of the environment.

The ICASA conference has the potential to be a critical point in the relationship between young people and HIV/AIDS in Africa. It provided the space and momentum for the development of energy and enthusiasm to take action – or to renew commitments to action. If these are adequately supported the event has a place in the history of Africa's response to one of its biggest carnages ever – HIV/AIDS.