

PRIORITIES IN CHILD SURVIVAL, EDUCATION AND PROTECTION

Raising awareness, providing training and ensuring adequate care for vulnerable groups will help prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS and save lives.

The first case of HIV/AIDS in Niger was reported in 1987. Since then, HIV prevalence in the general population has remained at less than 1%. Higher rates, however, are reported in regions such as Diffa, Agadez and Niamey. Some vulnerable groups record alarmingly high rates of infection: more than 25% of female sex workers, nearly 4% of the military and almost 3% of prisoners are HIV positive.

Although the national HIV prevalence rate among women of childbearing age is only 0.7%, this group remains particularly vulnerable to the virus. Only one woman in 10 is literate. One in two marries by the age of 15 and becomes pregnant before the age of 18. Of these women, two out of three have heard of HIV/AIDS, and only one in 10 knows about HIV testing. Consequently, HIV-positive women and their newborn babies receive little care, and their children run a high risk of becoming infected.

Young people aged 15-24 years, particularly girls, make up another high-risk group. One per cent of young women aged 20-24 are HIV positive, compared with 0.3% of young men in the same age group according to the 2006 DHS-MICS¹ survey.

UNAIDS-UNICEF estimates that the number of orphans and vulnerable children (OVC) affected by HIV/AIDS totalled 46,000 in 2006. Most of these children have no access to help or public services that ensure their care and protection.

UNICEF IN ACTION

Although the HIV/AIDS epidemic has caused international concern for the past 20 years, most young people, vulnerable children and women of childbearing age still do not know how to avoid contracting the disease. Nor do they have access to the information, expertise and services required to protect themselves. In response, UNICEF implemented a four-point strategy:

- Preventing mother-to-child HIV transmission
- Providing children with paediatric care
- Preventing teenagers and young people from becoming infected
- Protecting and supporting children affected by HIV/AIDS

Preventing mother-to-child HIV transmission (PMTCT)

Achieving a 30% reduction in the number of newborn children infected by their HIV-positive mothers by 2009 is the overall goal for PMTCT (prevention of mother-to-child transmission) in Niger. The first PMTCT pilot projects were set up in 2003. By 2007, 129 centres were in operation across the country's 42 health districts. Another 150 new centres will be established by 2009. Through these centres, more than half of all pregnant women will receive information about the need to undergo a free HIV test during antenatal consultations. Between 2004 and 2007, 910 health workers (doctors, midwives, nurses, social workers and laboratory technicians) received training in counselling, HIV testing techniques and caring for HIV-positive women during pregnancy and delivery. They also learned about treatment and follow-up – both clinical and biological – for children born to HIV-positive mothers.

Providing children with paediatric care

Results for most women who undergo HIV tests are negative. The test setting provides the women with opportunities to learn about HIV prevention and risk-free practices. Those who test positive for HIV are offered free treatment (antiretroviral treatment and cotrimoxazole prophylaxis), and their children can receive care until the age of 18 months when testing will determine their HIV status. Between 2004 and 2007, 383 children born to HIV-positive mothers received a course of antiretroviral prophylaxis at birth. Work on establishing treatment guidelines and protocols began in 2007. Training for referring physicians on appropriate paediatric treatment also started in Niger's 42 health districts.

Preventing teenagers and young people from becoming infected

Interventions aimed at preventing HIV transmission among young people focus on peer education. Peer educators receive life-skills training, which emphasizes HIV/AIDS prevention and helps participants to improve their communication, dialogue and negotiation skills. National campaigns to raise awareness about HIV/AIDS among young people include hip-hop and rap concerts. Between 2004 and 2007, these



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campaigns reached more than 250,000 young people through concerts and radio broadcasts. UNICEF also supports the Ministry of Education in its work to expand the HIV/AIDS prevention curriculum. Peer educators are being trained in middle schools, as well.

Protecting and supporting children affected by HIV/AIDS

To increase protection for orphans and vulnerable children (OVCs), UNICEF backed efforts by the Ministry for the Advancement of Women and for Child Protection to establish a national steering committee responding to OVC issues. A national policy is under development.

In 2005, Niger's social services identified 13,993 OVCs. Assistance programmes were established to improve living conditions and facilitate access to basic social services for vulnerable groups. Through these programmes, one third of orphans, children at risk and families in various parts of the country received help through income-generating activities, training and literacy. There are plans to increase by 50% the proportion of OVCs who have access to basic, high-quality social services by 2009.

¹ Demographic and Health Survey/Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey