Rwanda

Peers: Supporting each other for a Brighter Future
Knowledge of HIV prevention among adolescents and young people in Rwanda, aged 15-24, is only 65 per cent. An estimated 19,000 adolescents (10-19 years) are living with HIV and, in 2021, 28% of all new HIV infections in Rwanda occurred within that age group.\(^1\) Treatment coverage among adolescents is 78 per cent, far short of the 94% coverage for adults achieved in 2021 and the 95 per cent target.

To reduce new HIV infections and close the treatment gap among adolescents, UNICEF supported *Ubuzima Bwiza, Ishema Raniye* (My health, My Pride), an innovative programme that reached young Rwandans with adolescent-centered peer support and HIV and sexual and reproductive health (SRH).

The combined efforts of many players have been key to the programme’s success. Health center managers promoted youth corners and special adolescents-only days while community outreach for HIV testing combined the efforts of nurses, data managers, laboratory technicians and peer supporters. Community leaders facilitated the use of youth centers for peer supporters’ work, including hosting information sessions on HIV and SRH, establishing savings clubs, and providing edutainment. Health workers and peer supporters were trained together on administering an innovative HIV risk assessment tool and the use of HIV self-testing. District government officials, health center managers and community leaders collaborated enthusiastically on the initiative by sharing resources and joining monitoring visits.

Peer supporters received dedicated training on providing information and counselling on SRH, HIV prevention and treatment, seeking services for gender-based violence, coping

\(^1\) https://aidsinfo.unaids.org/
After vigorous mobilization, by early 2022 nearly 60,000 adolescents and young people in and out-of-school had been reached by peers through interpersonal communication, home visits, group sessions and in schools, and 23,000 adolescents and young people had received HIV testing services. The HIV risk assessment tool proved to be a useful way to screen adolescents and young people for individual risk, while peer-supported HIV self-testing showed high levels of acceptance, particularly among adolescents and young people reluctant to visit health facilities. With their consent, and the confidentiality of relevant service providers, adolescents who tested positive were supported for timely entry into care and adherence to treatment through peer-led, community-based, post-test support services. All adolescents, regardless of their HIV status, were counselled on HIV prevention. A programme assessment confirmed that peers can play a key role in testing new innovations and scaling up HIV services. Responding to the diverse needs of peer supporters and the dynamic nature of peer interventions, including adolescent mobility, will be built into future programmes. UNICEF is currently partnering with the Ministry of Health and the Rwanda Biomedical Council to conduct implementation research on the use of HIV self-test kits and the risk assessment tool by health workers and peer supporters to assess their impact on increasing the identification of adolescents and young people living with HIV. The findings will inform adolescent HIV testing strategies in Rwanda and across Eastern and Southern Africa region.

Peer volunteers taught me to love myself and become a stronger person for me and my daughter. I feel proud that I can contribute to my family by running a small business in the village. I am grateful that the peer volunteers supported me to be part of the community and live the life I have today in that I’m able to support my fellow peers with whom we share similar circumstances.

(Young mother living with HIV, Rwanda)