More Experiences from the Field: Benue State  
By Benue State field workers and supervisors  
Edited by E. Heroy, N. Dike, and R. Olajide

The REACH Household and Individual survey has come and gone but left behind a massive wealth of personal field experiences and special challenges. It has built for us a unique set of personal skills as well as some hard and soft lessons.  
-Terzungwe Ayebe, Supervisor

About a year ago, the Research Alliance to Combat HIV/AIDS (REACH) employed research assistants to help collect data on a cross-sectional study on acceptability and utilization of voluntary HIV Counseling and Testing in Nigeria. Since then, the field workers who were trained for the purpose of data collection dove into action to conduct Focus Group Discussions (FGD), house numbering, and interview surveys in the three selected Local Government Areas of Benue State.  
The training, which began about a year ago, was designed to build basic skills and capacity of the field workers. After the vigorous training workshops, the interviewers commenced conducting interviews. During this time, Benue State field workers and supervisors fine-tuned their research techniques and acquired new skills through their experiences with REACH. They came across various challenges throughout their research. For example, Apinega Aondowase found it difficult to get detailed information about questions asked from both the household and individual questionnaire correctly. To solve this, if he didn't get a complete answer, he would come back to the household on another day to get more details. Also, many interviewees had reservations about research teams, which affected REACH. They expressed to REACH that past research conducted in their communities led to no positive changes. As such, the participants wanted a voluntary counseling and testing centre be set up in their community before they would participate in the survey. Also, many interviewees had difficulty responding to questions that made them uncomfortable, especially the question about their last sexual intercourse.  

As a result of the skills of communication the field workers’ learned during REACH trainings, REACH staff were able to convince participants that their opinion on social, personal, and environmental factors will aid/help REACH to know the factors that affect the utilization and acceptability of voluntary counseling and testing centre (VCT). All in all, challenges were overcome and the experiences and trainings from REACH were successful. Many field workers came away from the project not only with newly polished research skills, but interpersonal skills that will last for a lifetime.  

Participating in REACH has sharpened my interpersonal skills or the act of creating rapport in the face of strangers. Many, if not all the respondents I interviewed were people I was meeting for the first time and there was no way I would have conducted a successful interview without creating the necessary rapport with the respondents. Rapport can be created in different ways such as presenting myself in a friendly manner and creating a good impression. – Aondoaver Ucho

REACH is a collaborative program of Northwestern University and the University of Ibadan with the support of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. REACH aims to improve HIV/AIDS prevention strategies in Nigeria through social science and community-based research.
Objective four of the NSF commits stakeholders to support non-health sectoral responses including provision of economic empowerment to vulnerable groups, and expansion of education and agricultural sector responses. The legal, cultural and economic factors that contribute to gender inequality in the country need urgent attention if the objectives and targets of the NSF are to be achieved. She said the implementation of the NSF requires a multi-sectoral and multi-disciplinary approach as the basis of the NSF itself. Implied in this and running through the NSF is the recognition of gender inequality and that empowering women and addressing women's rights concerns as a strategy towards the prevention, control and management of HIV and AIDS needs a multi-sectoral approach.

**Incorporating Human Rights into Policies**

On the issue of incorporating human rights approach in the NSF Tolupe Lewis observed that Nigeria has several relevant policy documents. She said this provided the basis of the broad-based multi-sectoral policy review initiative currently being implemented by UNIFEM with support from the Nigerian AIDS Responsive Fund of the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). The overall aim of the project is to promote the emergence of a coherent policy environment for the achievement of the human rights-based targets of the NSF. To achieves this; the project is being implemented at the national level and in states - Bauchi, Taraba and Cross Rivers. The project is also working very closely with the National Commission for the Control of AIDS (NACA) the Gender Manager and its Gender Technical Committee to integrate gender equality concerns into the organisation's structure, programme and processes. She said a desk-review of the relevant policy instruments in the health, education, agriculture and the law sectors was conducted, to assess the extent to which they facilitate the implementation of the NSF.

**Filling the Policy Gap**

The UNIFEM Country said the review process has been able to identify those aspects of the policies that require reform. A broad range of stakeholders have met to interrogate the report and validate it against current realities on ground. The findings and recommendations also form the basis for a national advocacy campaign to promote the reforms that would bring the sector policies in line with the goals of the NSF. The review has identified significant gaps in the responsiveness of the sectoral policies to the gender and human rights objectives of the NSF.

*To access this article online, go to [http://allafrica.com/stories/200907130101.html](http://allafrica.com/stories/200907130101.html).*

**Rwanda: Barakabaho Foundation Brings Hope to HIV/AIDS Orphans**

Kigali — Hope and living positively has been established among victims of the HIV-Aids within certain communities in Eastern Province. This has been made possible through interventions by Barakabaho Foundation an NGO which is financed by Christian aid International.

Barakabaho is a Kinyarwanda word that can be translated literary as, “Let them continue to live”. One of its core values is addressing the interrelationship between HIV/AIDS and poverty. HIV/Aids orphans are the main concern of the foundation. Other orphans however, are also catered for to an extent.

“We mainly help HIV orphans by giving them hope for the future. There is no doubt that the pandemic is related to poverty. The orphans need to be given life skills to avoid a cycle of the disease, Bishop Birindabagabo Alex, of Gahini Anglican Church and the brain behind the Foundation said.

The issue of HIV/AIDS is exacerbated by people's standard of living. The disease cripples economies to the individual level. By the time the parents die, they leave nothing for their children. It is therefore, imperative that the orphans be given life skills to start life a fresh.

"Apart from helping orphans to adopt and adapt behavioural changes, we help them to afford the minimum required nutrition. We view it as a human rights issue", Pastor Nsimiyimana Thadeo, of Byumba Anglican Church Dioceses said. Barakabaho Foundation's values on the pandemic have been echoed by several scholars on the international scene.

"Poverty is the foundation of many of our problems. It is no coincidence that Africa has the highest poverty rates in the world and accounts for the largest share of the world's AIDS cases. So there is a very close inter-relationship between poverty and HIV/AIDS. Poverty contributes," Dr. Samba, Africa regional director, World Health Organization said.

*This article continues on page 3...*
"Rwanda: Barakabaho Foundation Brings Hope to HIV/AIDS Orphans" continued, from page 2

Interestingly, the Foundation developed a different approach to control the spread of the disease known as -SAVE, breaking away from the much discussed ABC.

"The Christians leaders never felt comfortable with the common approach; A-abstain, B - be faithful or use C-use of condom otherwise collectively known as ABC. SAVE was thus adopted," Mama Karire, one of the founders' long time serving official said.

SAVE approach is a multidimensional model. It involves behavioural change and cultural flexibility, to accommodate the new demands to fight the disease. It is further interesting to note that the new approach, calls for people to circumcise as a scientifically proven way of reducing chances of infection.

Success stories

Typical successful stories are hereunder narrated by two cases; one by Namahirre Josian, 22 and the Mulinda Glatien family.

I am (Namahirre Josian) so happy today. I had undergone so many problems to the extent that I never expected to recover. God, through Barakabaho Foundation answered my cries, when not even my father or mother was near me. I have managed to educate my sisters and brothers, and look forward to going to school soon myself. I have a big modern banana plantation that does not offer us food only, but also money to buy other things, and save for the future.

We also own a hybrid cow and are constructing a big house for ourselves. All these achievements came when we had lost hope for life. After the death of our parents, I remained the leader of the home by virtue of my age. I am the eldest. Orphans like me should not lose hope-time may bring joy to you at some time. But what I should quickly advice vulnerable orphans like me, is to desist from any behaviours that may push them into catching the HIV/AIDS. The family of Mulinda Glatien and Kankuyo Clementine is also all smiles, after a long time miserable life. "We (the couple) are so much different after the sensitization and help we got from the Foundation. We never knew anything to do with family planning. Today we are spacing our children, a thing that is helping us to feed them well. Of course, the cow we got increased our happiness, "the couple told this reporter. They added that consequently they are able to get milk from the cow they received which has enabled them to manure their fields, hence increasing our overall domestic production.

"The HIV/AIDS pandemic will find it hard to penetrate our family. We have decided to be faithful to each other, "the couple added confidently.

Challenges

The efforts of the Foundation like any other are not immune from challenges. HIV risk perception in relation to peer pressure and drug abuse behaviour among adolescents has been the Foundation's great challenges. Despite the efforts on ground, adolescents continue to practice unsafe sex.

"I gave birth when I was about 24 years old. The father of this baby disappeared to Uganda and I have never seen him again. I live a lone in this hut you see with my kid. I do not even have money to feed it," Alphonsina Mutesi, 16, said. Teenage pregnancy shows that they do not practice safe sex, yet it is the leading cause of human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) infection globally.

Young people under the age of 25 are doomed if such trend is not reversed. HIV/AIDS will continue to spread rapidly, like wild fire, in the Province and the country at large. The issue of HIV/AIDS in Rwanda and elsewhere in the world cannot be handled in isolation. The interrelationship is inevitable. Barakabaho Foundation is therefore, getting it right by handling the two together.

Alleviating poverty among the orphans, and sensitizing them against morals that exacerbate the HIV/AIDS pandemic, should be given its due concern.

To access this article online, go to http://allafrica.com/stories/200907130242.html

More articles on page 4...
Militaries unite to fight HIV from plusnews.org

DAKAR, 9 July 2009 (IRIN) - Military forces from 20 countries in West and Central Africa have launched a regional HIV network to share information on combating HIV within their ranks and communities, following the example of other military-led efforts to fight the spread of HIV.

“We need to harmonize our interventions,” army captain Sami Kambiré from Burkina Faso told IRIN. “Without this network, what we have now are disparate strategies. We need to learn from one another what is working? What is not? Why?”

A number of studies on HIV prevalence rates among sub-Saharan Africa’s armed forces have shown higher rates than in civilian populations, with the notable exception of Ethiopia’s forces. The three-day conference to launch the Regional HIV Network of Military Forces in West and Central Africa, ending on 9 July, presented armed forces’ efforts to fight HIV in the region, best practices in fighting AIDS in Africa and a panel discussion on HIV and security.

Nigeria
Simeon Ekanom, coordinator of Nigeria’s Armed Forces Program of AIDS Control, told IRIN Nigeria’s government has recognized the heightened risk for HIV infection among soldiers. “We are more mobile, far from our families then the camps.”

The head of one of Nigeria’s state committees on HIV/AIDS told IRIN in August 2008 that both rebels and armed forces were committing rape in the Niger Delta conflict zone. Returning soldiers had an HIV infection rate twice as high as that of the general population, according to a recent study conducted by the Nigerian Civil Military Alliance to combat HIV/AIDS. The average nationwide HIV prevalence rate in Nigeria was 3.1 percent in 2008, according to UNAIDS.

In 1999 the Nigeria-based Pan African Committee of Military Medicine found Nigerian armed forces had double the possibility of contracting HIV within three years of joining the army. But Nigeria’s armed forces representative Ekanom told IRIN the situation has improved, though data remains scarce for HIV infection rates in the military. “Behaviours are changing. We go into the camps and talk to soldiers one-on-one. In groups, they do not internalize the message and think they could never get infected.”

The United Nations Security Council adopted a resolution in 2000 identifying HIV infection in defence forces as a threat to international peace. In 2001 a UN document raised the concern “the UN itself may be an unwitting agent for the spread of the [HIV] virus around the world” through its peacekeepers.

Ghana
Jane Ansah, a doctor with Ghana’s armed forces, told IRIN soldiers who test positive for HIV are not deployed. Ghana has up to 6,000 soldiers serving in five peacekeeping missions, said Ansah. During a presentation in Dakar at the network’s launch, Ansah explained how soldiers were provided condoms in the military barracks, to which Senegal’s Minister of Armed Forces, Becaye Diop, asked: “But by giving them condoms, are you not encouraging promiscuity?”

Ansah replied men will be approached by sex workers whether or not they have condoms. New recruits who test positive are not admitted into the armed forces, Ansah told IRIN. “We have gotten a lot of criticism over our ban.” A similar ban in South Africa was overturned by the courts in 2008.

During one of the events at the launch, Senegalese male soldiers acted out a seduction scene with local women, insisting on the men's right to sex because they were “protecting the women and improving safety,” to which the women – hands on hips – responded in unison: “AIDS will only leave us more insecure.”

To access this article online, go to http://www.plusnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportId=85212

If you wish to leave the listserv, please send an email to REACH@northwestern.edu stating that you would like to be removed or send a “SIGNOFF REACH” command to LISTSERV@LISTSERV.IT.NORTHWESTERN.EDU.

If you have any comments or questions about this newsletter, please feel free to email REACH@northwestern.edu.

REACH is a collaborative program of Northwestern University and the University of Ibadan with the support of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. REACH aims to improve HIV/AIDS prevention strategies in Nigeria through social science and community-based research.