Tackling HIV/AIDS in Africa: From Knowledge to Behavior Change
by Richard Joseph

November 04, 2009 — There is greater frankness today about development policy failures in Africa. It was reflected in President Barack Obama’s speech in Accra, Ghana on July 11 when he stated: “Development depends on good governance. That is the ingredient that has been missing in far too many places for far too long.” And it is also seen in President Jacob Zuma’s surprising declaration to the South African Parliament on October 29 for the need to “respond with urgency and resolve” to the “devastating impact of HIV and AIDS” on the nation.

It has taken many years for a South African president to speak frankly to his fellow citizens of the need to convert “knowledge into behavior change.” Unlike his predecessor, Thabo Mbeki, who refused to acknowledge how HIV was actually transmitted, Jacob Zuma now encourages South Africans to learn their HIV status and “take informed decisions to reduce their vulnerability to infection.” While estimates of new infections in South Africa are an astounding 750,000, they are also climbing relentlessly in Nigeria where latest annual estimates are put at 370,000.

In January 2006, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation made a large grant to support the Research Alliance to Combat HIV/AIDS (REACH), a collaborative program between Northwestern University and the University of Ibadan, Nigeria. Survey research has been completed in 12 communities in four Nigerian states on two projects: the social and cultural factors that influence vulnerability to infection and the willingness, or inhibition, regarding the use of testing and care facilities. A third pilot project on adolescents and HIV prevention was started when preliminary findings showed the high vulnerabilities of, and insufficient attention being devoted to, this age group.

This month, teams of REACH researchers will return to the twelve communities to report on the research findings. These studies could not have been conducted without the active cooperation of local authority figures: government, traditional and religious. In spring 2010, comprehensive reports of the three projects, along with policy recommendations, will be made available in Nigeria and internationally.

The four Nigerian states in which the REACH research was conducted—Oyo, Lagos, Cross Rivers and Benue—have prevalence rates of 2.2, 5.1, 8 and 10.6 percent, respectively. Understanding the reasons for these disparities requires probing the economic, cultural, normative and other factors involved. Even with this information, inducing the necessary remedial action must overcome great barriers.

One of the notable achievements of this era has been the provision of billions of dollars annually so that millions of HIV-infected persons worldwide can receive anti-retroviral drugs. However, a report just published predicts that unless there are drastic changes in infection rates, tackling AIDS and its consequences in poor countries could cost $35 billion annually in two decades. Since sub-Saharan Africa still accounts for two-thirds of persons infected with HIV, much more vigorous efforts are needed to curb transmission of the disease in the continent.

President Zuma told South Africans that “knowledge will help us to confront denialism and the stigma attached to the disease.” That is no easy charge after decades of disinformation and distrust. I was confounded in a tour of our research sites in Nigeria earlier this year when a man in one community complained that, as a result of drug treatment, it was now difficult to know who was infected and therefore whom to avoid. In that remark, knowledge, stigma, and behavior were tightly interwoven. Unwinding them to facilitate effective and humane action will require enhanced collaboration, at the level of communities, among government, social, religious, business and academic actors.

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Lack of Information Responsible For Increase in HIV/Aids Cases from allAfrica.com

Abuja — Insufficient information is responsible for the recent increase in HIV/AIDS cases the First Lady Turai Yar’adua has said. Turai who spoke at the weekend during the public presentation of the book entitled "Family/Personal guide against HIV/AIDS" said that the book would provide the necessary information about how families could deal with the prevention and treatment of HIV/AIDS.

Represented by the wife of the Deputy-Senate President Mrs Beatrice Ekweremadu, she said "the fight against this disease should not be left to the government and the private sector alone", but that "this fight should be more of a common responsibility for individuals.

Earlier the Director General National Agency for the Control of AIDS (NACA), Prof. John Idoko confirmed that most persons were not adequately armed with the right information on how to protect themselves which is mainly responsible for the rise in HIV/AIDS.

He promised that such protective and preventive message would be taken down to the grass root, lamenting that some people were not aware of the existence of AIDS.

He noted that "information is key to reducing the increase of the virus which on the long run will bring about behavioral change".

Treatment Idoko said is possible, but prevention, he added was the key.

President, Human Resources Development Trust (HRDT) and the publishers of the book, Mr. Carl Okorie pointed out that women made up to 67 per cent of the infected group adding that one of the major causes of the phenomenon was the lack of knowledge due to the dearth of information.

He stated that in the course of investigation, it was discovered that "most of the existing strategies adopted by stakeholders in the fight yield counter results due to misapplication and misinterpretation of information and the shocking misinterpretation of the disease by students in the secondary school made us understand why efforts by international organization and government yielded no results".

Okorie noted that there was the need to strive more for thorough testing, improved education and prevention strategies.

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SOUTH AFRICA: TV ad delivers silent HIV message from plusnews.org

JOHANNESBURG, 10 November 2009 (PlusNews) - A television advertisement that will air in South Africa in November aims to reach deaf people with vital information about how to protect themselves from HIV, while giving hearing South Africans a brief experience of a world without sound.

A recent survey by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) found that 14 percent of disabled respondents were living with HIV, but levels of knowledge about HIV were much lower than among other groups: only 21 percent had an accurate understanding of how the virus was transmitted, and just 20 percent knew their HIV status.

The silent one-minute ad features Eric Mahamba, a member of the Deaf Federation of South Africa, who uses sign language to communicate the dangers of having unprotected sex with multiple and overlapping partners. Subtitles ensure that the message is not lost on other viewers.

 "There is a new man in South Africa; a man who chooses a single partner over multiple chances with HIV," Mahamba signs. "A man whose self-worth is not determined by the number of women he can have."

According to the HSRC survey, 14 percent of disabled people reported having multiple and concurrent partners, a practice identified in recent research as one of the most risky behaviours for contracting HIV.

The commercial was created by Brothers for Life, a national campaign aimed at encouraging men to positively influence each other on issues relating to HIV, gender-based violence and male sexual and reproductive health.
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"We saw from the survey that they are a vulnerable group, but not many campaigns have targeted them in the past," said Richard Delate, country programme director of Johns Hopkins Health and Education in South Africa, which is leading the Brothers for Life campaign funded by USAID and a number of local partners.

Brothers for Life is also issuing a brochure in Braille to reach South Africa's blind population with information about HIV prevention.

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