

Learning lessons about HIV and AIDS

In November 2007, UNAIDS published its latest *AIDS Epidemic Update*. On the whole, the news is encouraging: global prevalence has finally levelled off and the number of new infections has fallen. By all accounts, it seems that organized prevention efforts are having the desired impact. There is, however, a caveat: the general trend masks the existence of geographical pockets where the disease continues to escalate. Most of these are in Asia.

An estimated five million people are living with HIV and AIDS in Asia and the Pacific. The epidemic came late to the region, and while the number of people infected is relatively small as a percentage of the population, it is growing rapidly: in 2007, there were 20 percent more new infections than in 2001. In Vietnam, for example, the number of HIV-positive cases more than doubled between 2000 and 2005, while Indonesia has the fastest growing epidemic in Asia.

given greater access to information, education and support about HIV and AIDS.

Increasing awareness

It was against this background that OFID, in 2005, decided to join forces with UNESCO to tackle the culture of silence, denial, shame and discrimination in Asia through a program of education and advocacy. The focus of the program (which ran from May 2005 to October 2007) was 12 severely-affected countries in Central, Southeast and West Asia.* Its aim was to halt the spread of the pandemic by raising awareness of HIV and AIDS through the education system – by engaging Ministry of Education officials, integrating HIV and AIDS into education curricula, and training teachers and young people to relay information to pupils in schools across the region. The program made the most of UNESCO's experience and adapted many existing teacher training manuals and advocacy toolkits.



In a bid to raise HIV/AIDS awareness among young people, UNESCO produced a wide range of country-specific training manuals and advocacy toolkits.

Photos: UNESCO

It is in the former Soviet Republic of Uzbekistan, however, that the statistics are most disturbing. The number of new registered cases of the disease has been increasing by 50 percent year-on-year, making it the fastest growing HIV/AIDS epidemic in the world. Although the numbers are still small – only 10,000 HIV and AIDS cases are registered in the country – 70 percent of these are among young people under 29 years of age. But because there is a higher incidence of the disease among sex workers, intravenous drug users and homosexuals, many young people believe that it is not a problem that will affect them. Such naivety is borne largely out of ignorance and underlines the need for young people – not only in Asia but around the world – to be

One of the countries targeted was Uzbekistan, where – with UNESCO's assistance – a new subject called Healthy Life Style and Family was introduced into the school curriculum for 14 to 16 year olds. Two hundred teachers were given a minimum of four days training. Once back at their own schools, these teachers trained their peers so that they, in turn, could teach their students about health issues, including HIV and AIDS. Together, these teachers have the potential to reach out to two million young people in

* The countries involved were Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Cambodia, China, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Lao PDR, Lebanon, Syria, Thailand, Uzbekistan and Vietnam.

Peer-to-peer outreach has proved an effective means of conveying important messages about HIV/AIDS.

Photo: UNESCO



schools across the country. The project is already making a huge impact. A survey of school children in pilot schools has shown a dramatic increase in awareness about HIV and AIDS as a result of the new subject, which is now due to be rolled out to 12 and 13 year olds too.

Reaching out to young people

In neighbouring Kazakhstan, a pilot project in partnership with the local non-governmental organisation Equal to Equal trained young people from eight schools as peer health educators. Now these teenagers hold regular sessions with large groups of their peers about health issues including HIV and AIDS. They will continue to do this peer-to-peer outreach for the next two or

three years – sharing vital health information with their fellow pupils as they progress through school. Feedback received after these peer health sessions shows that this project is already making a difference to young people's attitudes.

In fact, experience in other countries – like Brazil, Senegal and Uganda – has shown that early and energetic action is effective in terms of limiting the spread of an epidemic. In spite of this, however, one of the biggest challenges of the OFID/ UNESCO program has been to persuade some education officials that HIV and AIDS is a problem serious enough to warrant their attention – and to warrant space in an already over-crowded school curriculum.

In China, for example, where an estimated 700,000 people are living with HIV in a population of around 1.3 billion, some local education officials and school administrators were not fully aware of the risk of HIV and AIDS, or of the urgency of HIV prevention education. However, not taking early action can have potentially dangerous consequences: even a small rise in the percentage of the population infected could mean millions of people and families affected.

Over a period of two years, UNESCO worked in partnership with the National Academy for Education Administration in China. A series of one-day training sessions took place, covering HIV and AIDS prevention and school health policy for over a thousand directors of local educational bureaus and top and middle level administrators in higher education institutions. As a result, the level of awareness about HIV and AIDS increased significantly at a local level so that national guidelines on HIV and AIDS are now more likely to be implemented in schools.

Scaling up the response

With the number of people infected and affected by HIV and AIDS continuing to rise, and no cure in sight, all areas of prevention take on an increasing importance. The education sector must continue to be mobilized, strengthened and supported to protect school-age young people from infection, to increase access to care and support, and reduce stigma and discrimination about HIV and AIDS. Young people represent our best hope of containing the HIV and AIDS epidemic.

Through the OFID/UNESCO program, a new model has been created for HIV and AIDS prevention education that can now be scaled up across the Asia/Pacific region and beyond. By reaching out to education officials, teachers and schools, there is the potential to reach out to millions of young people – with potentially life-changing social consequences. ●

HIV/AIDS: More than just a health issue

Since it first came on the scene more than three decades ago, AIDS has evolved from a straightforward public health issue into probably the most destructive human tragedy of all time. In fact, in 2005, the United Nations identified the virus as the factor inflicting the single greatest reversal in human development history. Nowhere is this devastation more apparent than in Africa, whose demographic face has altered beyond recognition. Huge swathes of the productive workforce have simply disappeared, taking with them key skills, knowledge and experience, and millions of children have been left without parents or homes. The implications for social, economic and human development are frightening.

OFID Special Grant Account for HIV/AIDS

The importance attached to fighting the HIV/AIDS epidemic received universal recognition in 2000 when it was named as

one of the eight UN Millennium Development Goals. OFID's response was to set up a dedicated grant account to channel funding into the important areas of prevention, reduction of vulnerability, care and support. Following several replenishments, the account today is worth \$65 million.

In allocating the account's resources, OFID has developed partnerships with a core number of specialized lead agencies to jointly carry out some 20 major programs in over 90 affected countries. Partners include, among others, WHO, UNFPA, IFRC, UNAIDS, UNESCO, ILO, UNICEF, UNODC, UNDP and UNHCR.