

History of HIV and AIDS work at ActionAid

History of HIV and AIDS work at ActionAid

ActionAid was the first international charity to work on HIV and AIDS when in 1987 we funded the Ugandan organisation TASO, or The AIDS Support Organisation. Today TASO is a global leader in fighting stigma and ensuring the rights of people living with HIV, and the TASO model has been adopted in a number of African countries.

What is ActionAid doing on HIV and AIDS

ActionAid works on HIV in over 30 countries in Asia and Africa. During the 1990s we pioneered **Stepping Stones and Reflect**, which are participatory workshop tools which enable communities to confront HIV, identify its causes and change their behaviour accordingly. These programmes are now used in over 30 countries in Africa and Asia. In many countries we also provide **HIV-related services**, including voluntary counselling and testing and training personnel.

ActionAid focuses on **helping people living with HIV and AIDS**, through support groups, income generation activities, health and nutritional support and community care schemes. In more recent years, ActionAid has also placed a strong emphasis on **campaigning** around HIV and AIDS, to push governments to do more to tackle the pandemic. The Stepping Stones and Reflect programmes have been adapted into STAR (Societies Tackling AIDS through Rights) which trains people affected by HIV and AIDS to campaign for their rights, and in many countries this has helped improve access to HIV prevention, treatment and care. Since 2006 we have organised a Global Week of Action on AIDS each May as a focal point for these activities.

HIV as a global poverty issue

More than 33 million people are living with HIV globally, and today AIDS will claim the lives of more than 6,000 people.

HIV is intricately linked to poverty.

People who are poor, uneducated or living in dire conditions are at greater risk of infection, because they do not have the information or the means to protect themselves. When they get infected they are also unlikely to have access to medical care or even to HIV testing. Families affected by AIDS are plunged into greater poverty because they lose earnings when a family member is sick, and are likely to spend a lot of their income on health care. This can mean that children are taken out of school to work or care for the sick, so they too are caught in a vicious circle of poverty and AIDS.

While **medicines** which help people with HIV live longer are available in rich countries, in the developing world these are out of reach for many people. As a result, the devastation caused by AIDS has made ghost towns out of communities across Africa. Over 14 million children have lost their parents and are looking after themselves, while AIDS is killing off key workers like nurses, farmers and teachers, plunging some countries into virtual collapse. We believe that people should have a life of dignity in the face of HIV and AIDS.

Why is Africa so heavily affected by HIV and AIDS?

Almost 95% of people with HIV live in poor countries, and almost two thirds in Africa. This is explained in the clear links between HIV and poverty. In poor countries, not everyone can go to school and learn about HIV. Even when information is available, many people do not have access to clinics and hospitals where they could get tested for sexually transmitted infections and HIV or access condoms.

Also, when people are poor and their income is not secure, the need for money can be a powerful factor in driving people into sex work and other risky behaviour. Equally, poverty and insecurity make people migrate in larger numbers, and those who leave their families to search for work tend to have higher HIV rates.

Sexual inequality, which stops women from choosing when they have sex and how, is also a driving factor. In Africa, women account for more than 60% of all people living with HIV. This is discussed further below and you are likely to see its impact first hand in Malawi. Conflict is also a significant factor. Large numbers of people seeking refuge and high levels of violence during war time can lead to high levels of HIV infections.

About HIV and AIDS in Malawi

There is a devastating AIDS epidemic in Malawi that has already caused over 650,000 deaths, and AIDS continues to be responsible for the deaths of around ten people every hour. Out of a population of 12.3 million, almost one million people in Malawi were living with HIV at the end of 2005. AIDS is the leading cause of death amongst adults in Malawi, and is a major factor in the country's low life expectancy of just 38.5 years.

In recent years the problems of poverty, famine and AIDS have continued to exacerbate one another in Malawi. But intensive efforts have been made to increase awareness about HIV and to prevent its spread, and these efforts appear to have had a positive effect.

In 2004 newly elected President Bingu Wa Mutharika launched Malawi's first National AIDS Policy. This policy set the goal of improving the provision of prevention, treatment, care and support services, and called for a multi-sectoral response to the epidemic. A Principal Secretary for HIV and AIDS was appointed within the Government, and treatment and prevention programmes were scaled up.

The national HIV prevalence has stabilised between 12% and 17% since the mid-Nineties, and prevalence amongst women attending antenatal clinics has fallen slightly. Several urban areas, such as the capital Lilongwe, have witnessed a decline in HIV prevalence, although some rural areas have seen prevalence increase.

Who is affected by AIDS in Malawi?

The AIDS crisis has affected all sectors of society in Malawi, but certain patterns have emerged as the epidemic has progressed:

- The majority of HIV infections in Malawi occur through **heterosexual** sex. There is no available information about the number of infections transmitted through sex between men, as homosexuality is illegal, but the number is thought to be relatively low.
- There is a higher rate of HIV prevalence amongst **women** than amongst men: around 60% of adults living with HIV in Malawi are female.
- The majority of HIV infections occur amongst **young people**, particularly those between the ages of 13 and 24.
- HIV prevalence is almost twice as high in **urban areas** as it is in rural areas. However, studies suggest that prevalence is declining in many urban areas and rising in many rural ones.
- There is a high prevalence of HIV amongst certain labour groups in Malawi, including **sex workers, truck drivers, fishermen and other 'mobile' groups** whose movement between areas can aid the spread of HIV infection.
- The epidemic has also heavily affected **children**. At the end of 2005, an estimated 91,000 children in Malawi were living with HIV, and over half a million children had been orphaned by AIDS.

Our campaigning work in the UK

ActionAid began publicly campaigning on HIV and AIDS in the UK back in 2002. By this we mean trying to get our supporters and the public interested in these issues, and encouraging them to lobby our government to do more.

We currently have two campaigns, '**The World is Watching**' which focuses on meeting the global target of HIV prevention, treatment, care and support for all by 2010, and '**Invisible Women**', which aims to get the UK government to put women at the heart of its work on HIV and AIDS in poor countries.

Mission Malawi volunteers who are interested in getting more involved in these campaigns should contact the HIV and AIDS Team at ActionAid on 02075 617561,

The World is Watching

In their 2005 re-election manifesto the UK government pledged to secure international agreement on universal access to HIV treatment by 2010. In July of the same year, world leaders at the G8 summit in Scotland signed up to that pledge.

Since then, we have been working to hold political leaders to account on that promise, in particular to get the funds in place to make it possible. In 2005 years ago Manchester Pride took part in our 'The World is Watching!' Campaign, when people submitted a photo of their eyes to a giant petition. These images were used to decorate a double-decker bus which we drove around London on World AIDS Day and used as a meeting venue to grill the PM Tony Blair.

Invisible Women

Initially, men were hardest hit by HIV, particularly gay men. But increasingly the face of HIV and AIDS is female. Globally, 51% of those living with HIV are now women and the numbers are rising. Among young HIV positive people in Southern Africa, three quarters are female. Lack of education and economic dependence on male relatives make women vulnerable to HIV infection, as they know little about the virus and cannot force their husbands to use condoms. In many developing countries violence against women is rife. This puts women directly at risk of infection, where they are raped, and indirectly, where the threat of violence makes it difficult to negotiate safe sex. What's more, lower income and poor access to healthcare means that once they become infected many women cannot get the care and support they need to survive.

In 2007 ActionAid International became a member of Women Won't Wait, a global coalition working to address HIV and AIDS and end violence against women and girls. With women's rights identified as a key priority for our theme, ActionAid UK's HIV Team was keen to launch a UK project that would support our international work. The fact that the government is currently revisiting its global strategy on HIV and AIDS seemed an ideal opportunity to launch a campaign to persuade the UK to put women's rights - particularly violence against women - at the heart of its new plan to tackle AIDS. On World AIDS Day 2007 ActionAid launched Invisible Women, a new campaign calling on the UK government to help tackle the impact that AIDS is having on women in developing countries, by putting women at the heart of its new strategy on HIV and AIDS.

Does ActionAid promote abstinence from sex?

ActionAid is opposed to HIV prevention work which focuses only on abstinence from sex or "faithfulness". While in theory these are the best ways to avoid HIV infection, in reality these strategies ignore the reality of most people's lives – particularly women's - and make those who are not in a position to say no to sex (especially women) more vulnerable to HIV. Instead, we believe in empowering people and giving them a full range of choices about their lives and health. Sex education in schools should ensure that young people have the full information and the skills to make their own choices about sexual health. We strongly believe that condoms should be promoted as a vital tool in preventing transmission of HIV.

Examples of ActionAid work on HIV and AIDS around the world

Ulusi Youth Group

ActionAid's Partner the Ulusi Youth Group is based on the shores of Lake Kisumu, (Kenya) where HIV prevalence is 25%. Some members of the group are HIV+, others have lost their parents or relatives to AIDS. They organise activities, such as drama, story telling, puppet shows, to teach local people – many of whom are illiterate - about HIV and how to protect themselves. As well as talking about safe sex, they use these methods to tackle taboo issues such as child abuse and prostitution. They also run AIDS awareness activities in school, and have a small resources centre where they provide condoms, counselling and advice.

Bags of love

ActionAid funds the Nepal National Social Welfare Association's maya ko thaili (bag of love) project. Nepalese migrants working in India are sent packages which include a letter from their family, some family keepsakes and HIV & AIDS-related information. The package reminds the worker of their family and promotes awareness of the dangers of unsafe sex.

Testing and services

From case studies

Community HIV Training

Stepping Stones is a training programme that helps women and men explore their own sexual health needs, discuss the changes that they want, and find ways of making those changes.

Parallel workshops take place for men and women - by working in separate groups they have a safe, supportive space for discussing intimate issues, using methods such as role-play to build on their own experiences and priorities. The separate groups, then meet together to share insights.

Results include safer sexual behaviour, reduction in domestic violence, greater sharing of household tasks by men, and improved communication between couples and between parents and children, especially on sensitive issues relating to HIV and sexual health.

Travelling testing centres

In many countries, people who want to know their HIV status simply can't afford the journey to a hospital, or to take the time off to get there. ActionAid has funded trained counsellors and

mobile testing units, which visit communities, raise awareness of HIV and offering testing and counselling to those who need it. This can help people to reconsider their behaviour, and take better care of themselves and others in future, while also enabling those who are positive to access medical care before its too late.

Kindlimuka - Farmers cooperative for people living with HIV

Kindlimuka, established in 2002, is an association providing home based care, orphan support, mosquito nets, and income and food for members. It has 57 members, and over 80 beneficiaries, all of whom are living with or affected by HIV. ActionAid funds Kindlimuka's farm cooperative, which produces food for members and beneficiaries, and raises extra income through sales to the community. Additional profits are used to pay full time workers, to support members and to fund new community initiatives for people in need.

Dating in ethiopia

In Ethiopia, ActionAid funds a dating service for HIV-positive listeners of a radio station, with the aim of ending the stigma associated with the virus and the social isolation of those who are HIV-positive.

Milana

ActionAid works with Milana, a network of people living with HIV in Bangalore, Southern India. The network began as a support group where men and women living with HIV came to talk over their feelings, fears and any obstacles they have encountered, but today also provides medical care to people living with HIV, and supports them with food, shelter and emergency financial assistance. Recently, Milana has become more actively involved in advocacy and campaigning and last May when UN members met in New York to discuss HIV&AIDS members of Milana joined by video link. Members have also been involved in a number of successful campaigns to ensure that India's drugs companies can continue to produce cheap AIDS drugs for people in developing countries.

Unity

In Cambodia, sex workers (male and female) are a highly stigmatised group, and are most vulnerable to HIV infection. ActionAid works with Unity, a network of sex workers who lobby the government for protection of their rights and access to HIV and sexual health services. The network mobilises sex workers, and members of the lesbian, gay and transgender communities to address issues related to stigma, social ostracism, condom use, forced labour, domestic violence, law enforcement, drug abuse and food security.

Global Week of Action on AIDS

In 2007, for the second year running, ActionAid has coordinated a Global Week of Action on AIDS. It provides an opportunity for campaigners around the world to unite in calling for a stronger response to the global AIDS crisis and this year over 30 countries took part. Campaigners organised events, demonstrations and meetings to demand greater accountability and more resources for the fight against AIDS.

- Activists in Somaliland took to the air waves, to host a series of radio programs to increase awareness of HIV&AIDS.
- In India, actions happened in 12 states, with events ranging from candlelit vigils to a painting competition in schools to raise awareness of HIV.

'The Voice of Women', Sierra Leone

The AIDS epidemic in Sierra Leone, like in the majority of countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, is disproportionately affecting women. Gender-based violence, human rights violations, sexual abuse of children, rape, domestic violence, sexual assault, forced marriage, widow inheritance and harmful traditional practices coupled with lack of basic HIV prevention services all converge to explain the disparity in HIV infections between men and women in Sierra Leone.

So, in May this year a National Network of Women living with HIV and AIDS was launched, entitled "The Voice Of Women" and supported by ActionAid. The launch was attended by 200 women living with HIV and AIDS from all over the country.

These women will embark on collective advocacy and support women to use policies, practices and laws that protect their sexual and reproductive health, and land, income and other property rights. They also aim to reduce the burden of AIDS care which falls disproportionately on women and girls and will support the formulation of laws that protect the rights of women especially on domestic violence, inheritance and the registration of customary marriage and divorce and all laws on HIV and AIDS.