

Viewpoint

In this section we ask for two points of view on HIV and Aids education and development education

Skillshare Ireland's work with PLWHA Networks in Southern Africa

Fran Flood

Skillshare Ireland is an overseas non-governmental organisation (NGO) working to reduce poverty, injustice and inequality and to further economic and social development in partnership with people and communities throughout the world. We do this by sharing and developing skills and ideas, facilitating organisational and social change and building awareness of development issues.

The primary focus of our work in the HIV/AIDS area is in Southern Africa where we are working in an Irish Aid supported project with four People Living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA) partner organisations. The aim of the project is to increase the voice of people living with HIV/AIDS and their support groups through strengthening their own capacity and their institutions (PLWHA networks and support groups) to enable PLWHA networks and support groups to play a pro-active advocacy role in influencing policy formulation and HIV/AIDS planning processes both at local and national levels. This, in turn, informs our policy work in the HIV/AIDS area which we share with fora here in Ireland.

The overall goal of the project is to increase the capacity of people living with PLWHA and the affected people to participate and involve themselves actively in community development projects so as to live positively by strengthening individual capacity and their institutions. Encouraging people living with HIV/AIDS, especially women and girls, to participate in development projects would be one way to reduce stigma and discrimination and encourage them to gain confidence to live positively with their conditions thereby improving their self-esteem and right to life. The project also encourages local leaders and communities to participate in the development of income generating activities by community orphanages for

children living with HIV/AIDS.

The HIV and AIDS epidemic continues to spread globally. At the end of 2005, an estimated 40.3 million people around the world were living with HIV, including the 4.9 million people who acquired HIV in 2005 (UNAIDS, 2004). The pandemic claimed an estimated 3.1 million lives in 2005. Sub-Saharan Africa remains the most affected region and is home to about 25.8 million people living with HIV (UNAIDS, 2004).

The Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) region of Southern Africa has the highest levels of HIV infection to be found globally, and many countries are now grappling with the intensifying impact of mature pandemics of HIV and AIDS, and the related pandemic of TB, that are reversing the hard-won development gains of the past 50 years (SADC HIV/AIDS Strategic Framework, 2003). Statistics indicate that seven of the SADC countries (all with prevalence above 15%) are the worst affected and that the region has around 14 million adults and children currently infected. In 2003, Botswana and Swaziland had the highest prevalence with 37.3% and 38.8% respectively, followed by Lesotho (28.9%), Zimbabwe (24.6%), South Africa (21.5%), Namibia (21.3%) and Zambia (16.5%) (UNAIDS, 2004).

A central principle of our work in Skillshare is the involvement and empowerment of partner organisations in any joint activities.

This partnership way of working is well exemplified in a study carried out by Skillshare in Southern Africa in 2003 to assess the needs and capacity gaps of people living with HIV and AIDS and their organisations, networks and support groups and commissioned by the SADC/DFID. The study found that PLWHA and their networks in Botswana, Lesotho, Mozambique and Swaziland face numerous challenges, including:

- all levels of organisations and networks for PLWHA are experiencing gaps in relation to institutional and organisation capacity, networking and collaboration mechanisms, advocacy and community mobilisation and resource mobilisation. These capacity gaps make it difficult for PLWHA networks, organisations and support groups to effectively service their members and affected families
- some of the specific problems that were identified are: widespread stigma and discrimination; poor access to health services and treatment; poor nutritional support; inadequate home-based care; and inadequate support from communities and their leadership in providing psychological and socio-economic support to infected and affected individuals

- in addition, the needs assessment also clearly indicated that PLWHAs have needs that go beyond clinical care and treatment. Critically, these include social support to alleviate the socio-economic impact of HIV (e.g. basic needs for food, school fees and shelter). Other needs include psychological support to cope with the implications of having a life-threatening condition, the right to protection in employment, confidentiality, medical care and access to new treatments, or financial support to acquire medication
- PLWHA need counselling, emotional support, protection against discrimination and stigma, and social support for their orphans left behind after the parent dies.

A strong recommendation from the assessment was to develop a strategy to build capacity of civil society organisations to increase national responses to HIV/AIDS in the affected countries.

It is in this context that Skillshare Ireland in partnership with National Networks of people living with HIV and AIDS in four countries that are most affected developed a regional project to strengthen the capacity of people living with HIV and AIDS and their institutions. The project works with four National Networks of PLWHAs in Mozambique, Swaziland, Lesotho and Botswana to provide support to 80 selected Support Groups (SGs) of people living with HIV and AIDS.

As indicated the study highlighted the fact that although there is much activity at grassroots levels, PLWHA organisations lack the capacity to contribute effectively to the fight against AIDS within their communities. Using Skillshare's long experience in working with partner organisations in capacity building and skills development, the project:

- uses peer education approaches, recruiting and training PLWHAs themselves to use their status as a role model to spread HIV prevention messages and promotion of preventive measures such as condom use amongst the communities and their colleagues
- provides training to PLWHAs themselves on how to live positively with the disease including ARV adherence and management and nutritional support
- provides training and incentives to community volunteers and caregivers (families) to increase their support to people living with HIV and AIDS and
- strengthens the capacity of leaders of support groups and networks by providing leadership, managerial, organisational development and governance training to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of

these structures to deliver a robust and appropriate response to people living with HIV/AIDS.

We recognise that increasing the involvement of PLWHAs and communities in the project implementation and participation in their own development is the key to achieving greater sustainability. This is achieved by:

- organising community fora to make communities aware as to how they can increase their support to PLWHA and thereby reduce stigma and discrimination directed at PLWHAs and their families
- establishing community based alternative income generation activities for terminally ill HIV patients such as kitchen gardening projects
- training PLWHAs themselves and community leaders on advocacy strategies to increase their capacity to lobby governments to enact laws/policies that could reduce violation of PLWHA rights such as the rights of mobile PLWHAs to have access to ARV drugs across countries
- ensuring that women and children who are living with HIV are equally involved in the activities of the project through keeping a 50:50 percent ratio of male and female participants.

The project also sets out to develop the knowledge and skills of PLWHAs providing adequate training in small business management skills and facilitating the establishment of Community Revolving Savings Fund (CRSF) to help PLWHAs gain access to sustainable financial resources thus enabling them to start their own businesses both at local and national levels.

In this respect the project specifically targets widows, widowers and people with disabilities who are living with HIV/AIDS, while at the same time continuing with the mainstreaming of gender in all support group interventions. By enabling people living with HIV and AIDS to gain sufficient skills and access to capital, the project is helping them to compete effectively in job creation and thereby increase their chances of gaining access to employment opportunities which will enable them to earn income and support themselves and their families.

The underlying power of this project is in creating an enabling environment for greater involvement of People living with HIV and AIDS in programmes and activities in order to encourage positive living through strengthening selected community support groups and national networks in the four countries and, importantly, in sharing best practice across the four countries.

In order to achieve this, the project provides training in treatment literacy and preparedness, behavioural change interventions to PLWHAs and their caregivers, positive living coping strategies, provision of training kits for a wide range of support groups for home-based care services and providing psychosocial counselling skills for members of support groups of PLWHAs. Other interventions include, recruiting and training of PLWHAs themselves who are members of support groups and networks to act as community volunteers to support their members. They also conduct training on HIV/AIDS programming and management to support group members and national PLWHA network staff and as well as training support groups and PLWHA networks on organisational development, leadership and governance.

References and Bibliography

UNAIDS (2004) *Questions and Answers*, Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS.

SADC (2003) *Strategic Framework and Programme of Action*, SADC.

Fran Flood has been the Director of Skillshare International Ireland since September 2003. Fran has worked in the NGO sector in Ireland for much of his working life. This has seen him working in international voluntary work, in the mental health field, in the area of drugs awareness in Dublin's inner city and with people with disabilities. Fran has also been a development worker in The Gambia and Zimbabwe.