

# The role of the media in disseminating HIV and AIDS information in Somaliland

Eliezer Wangulu



Photo: SHARA

**Somaliland is situated in the eastern Horn of Africa. It was part of the wider Somalia until it declared itself an independent state after the collapse of the autocratic rule of Mohammed Siad Barre in 1991. Statistical evidence on the extent and spread of HIV in Somaliland is seriously lacking, but data from the blood banks, testing of suspected cases of people living with HIV (PLWH) and information from the few studies conducted in Somaliland, suggest an increase in infection rates. A study by WHO and the Ministry of Health showed HIV prevalences of 1.4% among antenatal care patients, 3.5% among sexually transmitted infections (STI) patients and 5.6% among tuberculosis patients in Somaliland. Also, the prevalence of HIV in neighbouring countries and where many Somali refugees live is high. For example, Ethiopia's HIV prevalence rate stands at 6.7% while Djibouti's is 3.5%. Notwithstanding this evidence, there is little general awareness about either the causes of HIV infection or the practices, both medical and social, which can contribute to its prevention or spread.**

The media can play a crucial role in creating an enabling and supportive environment where some of the taboo issues and underlying driving forces of the epidemic can be addressed. The media are in a position to create greater public awareness of HIV and AIDS, which is necessary before individuals critically look at the challenges posed by the epidemic to be able to make informed decisions to help prevent infections, protect themselves, and ensure proper care and treatment of PLWH. News coverage reinforces information that people receive about the epidemic from other sources, such as their friends, health care workers, and billboards.

## Challenges faced by the journalists in Somaliland

Covering the issues of HIV and AIDS with maximum efficiency requires a clear understanding of the challenges and the obstacles faced by journalists in Somaliland. Media practitioners in general do not have adequate skills in reporting on HIV and AIDS effectively. Myths and misconceptions as

well as lack of understanding of the epidemic's terminologies are portrayed in the media reports in Somaliland. Also, media practitioners do not have skills on how to approach PLWH so as to minimize stigma and discrimination which tends to drive the disease underground. In some cases, reporters use stigmatizing language in reference to PLWH. However, this is out of ignorance rather than the desire by journalists to stigmatize PLWH. There are limited HIV and AIDS resource centres and this makes it difficult for journalists to get relevant and up-to-date information on the epidemic that can be used to come up with informative media reports on HIV and AIDS. Finally, the general standard of journalism in Somaliland is rather low. The challenge has always been limited or lack of skills in the areas of writing, editing and effective dissemination of especially print media products.

## Building capacity to report on HIV and AIDS

The contribution of Progressio to three civil

society organizations and indirectly to several media organizations, has in a way tried to address the gaps identified in terms of effective reporting on HIV and AIDS. Progressio, formerly known as International Cooperation for Development (ICD), is an international development charity that combines advocacy work to secure equitable policies with the strengthening of community-based organizations. Progressio's three partner organizations in Somaliland are the Somaliland HIV and AIDS Network (SAHAN), Hargeisa Youth Development Association (HYDA) and Somaliland National Youth Organisation (SONYO). Progressio works with these counterparts, sharing media-related skills, planning, designing publications, coming up with distribution strategies as well as monitoring the effectiveness of the media projects. A Media Advisor – HIV and AIDS Programming, the author of this article, supports partner organizations to develop media strategies based on the local, national

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as well as organizational context. His other responsibilities include linking HYDA and SONYO with national newspapers, Radio Hargeisa and Somaliland National Television and organising national sensitization workshops on the role and importance of the media in disseminating correct and precise information on HIV and AIDS.

The Media Advisor, in collaboration with the partner organizations, has undertaken four workshops, between August 2006 and April 2007, aimed at building the capacity of SAHAN member organizations to be able to produce their own Information Education and Communication (IEC) and advocacy materials on HIV and AIDS. Participants were drawn from all the six regions of Somaliland. Already, many of the workshop participants are assisting their organizations to come up with IEC and advocacy materials and also contributing articles to SAHAN's newsletter. So far, 55 participants

have attended the trainings. Also, a total of 27 journalists from across the country reporting for both print and electronic media were invited for a national workshop on the role of the media in the dissemination of HIV and AIDS information which was held in Hargeisa in August 2006. In April 2007, two additional workshops were held for media practitioners to further build their capacity to report on the issue of HIV/AIDS effectively.

### Journalists Associations Against AIDS

At the conclusion of the first national workshop, the participants felt the need to come up with a network of journalists reporting on HIV and AIDS in Somaliland. Interim officials of the network, Somali HIV and AIDS Reporters Association (SHARA), have been elected and a constitution has been written and they are now seeking registration with the government. Progressio is helping the journalists in the operationalization of the network. SHARA has established an office in Hargeisa, for which Progressio purchased essential office equipment including computers, a printer, a photocopier and furniture.

After the training, the journalists promised to give the epidemic prominence in their media, dedicate airtime/space to HIV and AIDS issues and also come up with special broadcasts and columns on HIV and AIDS. For example, one of the trained journalists, Mr Ahmed Sahadid, who works for the Somaliland National TV (SLNTV), said in an interview that he now reports more on HIV and AIDS. *"We now mainstream HIV and AIDS across a number of programmes. Right now I am moderating a TV panel discussion whose subject is HIV and AIDS."* Another beneficiary of the training, Mr Mohammed Gaas, editor of the weekly Horn Tribune and chairperson of SHARA, said: *"I have made it my responsibility to carry an article on HIV and AIDS every week."* They are also committed to increasing their knowledge on the issues surrounding HIV and AIDS and sharing facts and figures on the status of HIV and AIDS at the global, regional and country levels to become more effective in reporting on the epidemic. The

network would like to establish linkages with already established networks of Journalists Associations Against AIDS (JAAIDS) in Eastern and Southern Africa and even in Nigeria where the concept was introduced (see the Box). They also want to see the establishment of an HIV and AIDS media helpdesk in one of the agencies, preferably SAHAN, where journalists can get the latest information on the pandemic.

Progressio's collaboration with the three organizations has also drawn the interest of funding agencies like UNDP and UNICEF to realize that their funding is making a difference in reaching communities in all the six regions of Somaliland through IEC and advocacy information on HIV and AIDS produced by the three organizations such as newsletters, posters, stickers, reports and websites.

The role of the media is so critical if HIV and AIDS is to be effectively tackled. This was aptly captured by the former UN Secretary General, Mr Kofi Annan, who stated that: *"When you are working to combat a disastrous and growing emergency, you should use every tool at your disposal... Broadcast media have tremendous reach and influence, particularly with young people, who represent the future and who are the key to any successful fight against HIV and AIDS. We must seek to engage these powerful organizations as full partners in the fight to halt HIV and AIDS through awareness, prevention and education."*

### Journalists Against AIDS

Journalists Against AIDS (JAAIDS) is a concept that was initiated by the media in Nigeria after realizing the need to be involved in the dissemination of timely and accurate information to enable people make informed decisions that could lead them to avoid HIV infection. JAAIDS Nigeria is a media-based NGO working in the field of HIV and AIDS and development.

Through its basic training programmes, SAfAIDS (Southern Africa HIV and AIDS Information Dissemination Service) found that many journalists in sub-Saharan Africa were interested in starting similar groups that would enhance the capacity development of local journalists and identify information gaps within their own countries. With support from SAfAIDS, JAAIDS groups have been developed in Botswana, Malawi, Mozambique and Zambia.

In Kenya, UN agencies have been training journalists to report effectively on health, especially HIV and AIDS. For example, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) has trained 23 Kenyan journalists in Accra, Ghana as well as locally at Moi University. The journalists have now founded an association called Kenya Media Network on Population and Development (KEMEP) whose mandate is similar to that of JAAIDS in Nigeria and southern Africa.

More information:

JAAIDS Nigeria: [jaaidnsng@nigeria-aids.org](mailto:jaaidnsng@nigeria-aids.org),  
<http://www.nigeria-aids.org>

SAfAIDS: [info@saf aids.org.zw](mailto:info@saf aids.org.zw), <http://www.saf aids.net>  
KEMEP: [kemeporg@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:kemeporg@yahoo.co.uk)

### Eliezer Wangulu

Media Advisor – HIV and AIDS  
Programming, Progressio, Somaliland and  
former co-executive editor of *Exchange on  
HIV/AIDS, Sexuality and Gender*

Correspondence:

Progressio Hargeisa – Somaliland  
PO Box 10012, Republic of Djibouti  
Tel: +252 2 523 72  
Mobile: +252 2 4429 154  
E-mail: [ewangulu@yahoo.com](mailto:ewangulu@yahoo.com)  
Web: <http://www.progressio.org.uk>