



Building HIV-positive organizations in South Africa

The role of sharing experiences and results

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During 2003, Project Empower, in collaboration with the Health Economics HIV/AIDS Research Division (HEARD) of the University of KwaZulu Natal, began a process of exploring ways in which civil society organizations (CSOs) could learn to live with HIV. We worked with 10 KwaZulu Natal-based non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and community-based organizations (CBOs) to construct a clearer picture of the implications that the epidemic has for the internal workings and sustainability of these organizations.

Located in eastern South Africa, KwaZulu Natal province has one of the highest HIV prevalences in the country. The Leadership Forum, as the programme was titled, brought together a mix of both rural and urban CSOs that ranged in size from CBOs and NGOs with small, localized communities, to NGOs working province-wide.

None of the organizations that participated in the forum focus directly on HIV/AIDS service delivery, although all have had some experience of working with HIV-positive people. All participants in the process were in leadership positions in their organizations. Organizations were specifically asked to nominate a representative who had the authority to influence the organization's planning and management processes. Participants interacted in a number of learning sessions over a nine-month period ending in September 2003.

As a result of this process organizations have begun to understand and deal with the fact that the epidemic has devastating

economic implications, but more significantly, understand and agree that it is the social fabric (the relationships that make organizations function) that is going to change and a significant effort has to be made to develop new ways of relating.

Assumptions and principles

In undertaking this work, Project Empower made a few fundamental assumptions about finding organizational solutions to the problems of HIV and AIDS. Solution-finding is a process that requires that we:

- understand our organizations,
- predict the potential impact of HIV/AIDS,
- propose and test a number of strategies to deal with this impact,
- share our learning and experiences of working on HIV and AIDS, and
- constantly review and adapt our initiatives in the light of new learning and experience.

With these premises underpinning the programme, the following principles were used to guide the structure, content and

focus of the exercises and discussions in the workshops.

1. *Organizations are unique* – each has an individual personality that is formed through the interactions between the people, systems, and contexts (or 'worlds') making up the organization. The individual personality, or self, of an organization will determine its response to the HIV epidemic.
2. *People are at the centre of the epidemic* – dealing with HIV/AIDS requires that we place individuals at the centre of our responses. At the same time we cannot forget that organizations have limited resources. Achieving a balance between the needs of the organization and the needs of staff members is critical.
3. *Policy-based approaches are limited in their application* – organizational culture (relationships and the way people and systems interact and construct each other) cannot be simply regulated. Policy can only be implemented effectively within the context of an open organizational culture.
4. *There is no single approach or generic solution for dealing with HIV/AIDS in the workplace* – solutions have to be crafted to suit the organization by the people who



Group work during a Leadership Forum meeting organized by Project Empower

work in that organization. Solutions to the problems that HIV and AIDS present are not permanent and have to be constantly reviewed and adapted in the light of new learning and experience.

5. *Organizations are not independent, isolated entities* – they operate within a fluid environment that impacts on their work, and the ways in which they work.

Deriving lessons from practice

Policy development was seen to be one of a number of actions that needed to be ad-

ressed in developing a comprehensive workplace programme. Workplace programmes should include activities to reduce stigma and create a more open and accepting organizational culture; the provision of treatment and care; prevention; and psychosocial support. In addition, serious attention needs to be paid to work practices that place staff at risk of infection. The primary consideration though in designing a workplace programme – and all its components – has to be realistic and take both resource constraints and the culture of the organization into consideration.

While much time was devoted to building a clearer understanding of the impact of HIV/AIDS, participants in the pilot felt that it was essential that lessons from implementation be shared and discussed in the group and that the future process should focus on implementation and deriving lessons from practice. It was felt that it was important that the group met a considerable number of times and that efforts be made to support each others' programmes – in terms of skills, resources and learning opportunities. Another lesson was that donor organizations are critical in the process of finding solutions and should be more intimately involved in the programme (see Box on p.13).

Building HIV-positive organizations

Based on the experiences of the first group, the programme 'Building HIV-positive organizations' was started in Spring 2005. It was designed to take into account the need for increased interaction and learning time, donor participation and creating opportunity for collective reflection. The 18-

Lessons learned

- Lessons from the implementation of workplace programmes should be shared and discussed.
- Donor organizations can play a critical role in supporting programmes to deal with HIV/AIDS in the civil society workplace, and they need to be involved more intimately.
- Workplace policies can only be implemented effectively within the context of an open organizational culture.

month process will culminate in a learning event in September/October 2006.

The implementation of the programme relies on organizations' active participation in a Learning Group that meets regularly to share ideas, relate experiences of implementation and contribute to a collective pool of knowledge/learning. Learning groups are made up of 15-20 CSOs (both community-based and non-governmental) from a similar geographical region. Project Empower is working with two groups of organizations, based in the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu Natal Midlands. Participation in the learning group is limited to persons in the organizations who are in leadership positions – who are able to influence the organizations they represent.

Leaders from those organizations meet regularly over a year to examine the impact (current and predicted) of HIV/AIDS on CSOs' work broadly – and their organizations specifically. The main thrust of the workshop programme is:

- to build an understanding of the predicted



Symbol used by Project Empower to represent a non-profit organization: a nurturing womb that projects and nourishes the community but in a constant state of insecurity, having to balance a range of expectations

- impact and to relate that to their individual organizations,
- to develop individual workplace programmes to deal with the impacts,
 - to develop action plans and test responses in their organizations,
 - to participate in a peer support group to share their experiences and exchange advice and learning from implementation.

Donor participation

In addition to the learning groups established for CSOs, interested donor organizations were invited to participate in a parallel, linked process to discuss strategies

to support the implementation of their partners' workplace programmes. The discussions in this learning group focus on the broader strategic implications for service delivery in the development sector and the role donor organizations can play in supporting programmes to deal with HIV/AIDS in the civil society workplace. Donor organizations will meet to examine and discuss recent research findings, and begin the process of developing a broader donor response to the predicted impact.

While donors have expressed significant interest in the idea, very few have actually

made a commitment to participate directly in the discussions, preferring to receive information from learning events.

Sharing learning

Project Empower will facilitate the ongoing exchange of information and learning between all the participating organizations (donors and civil society organizations) and host a learning event at the end of the programme cycle. The goal of this event is to share lessons learned, evaluate the learning experience and propose a joint strategy for future work.

There is still much to be learned. This learning can only begin once we start implementing our plans – so that we can fail and adapt and modify what we are doing until we find solutions that are suitable for our organizations. We have to learn as individuals and individual organizations, but we also have to make sure that we are able to share our learning and learn from the trials and errors of others doing similar things. ■

Donor roles

Do donors have a role to play in internal mainstreaming and NGO workplace programmes? Many international NGOs, like Oxfam, CARE International and VSO do have workplace policies and programmes for their own staff. Cordaid and Hivos have workplace programmes for their staff in regional offices. But what is the responsibility of a donor, while funding local NGOs?

A comparison: An HIV-positive person finds it difficult to be open about his/her status to the employer. If there is no written HIV/AIDS workplace policy, this staff member might risk career perspectives, less training opportunities, stigma, discrimination, etc. A written HIV/AIDS workplace policy gives staff the 'security' that it is safe to be open about HIV/AIDS and moreover the staff member is able to access the services as described in the workplace programme. The organization can give him/her and/or the family the necessary support (access to care, treatment, etc.)

The same is true for a director of a local NGO. The director finds it difficult to be open about the HIV/AIDS situation of his/her organization to the donor. Donors are keen to get concrete results from the local funded organizations. A local NGO that has difficulties in coping with HIV/AIDS and whose staff is heavily infected or affected by HIV/AIDS, does not function in an optimal way. Its results might seriously deteriorate. If there is no written donor guideline which explicitly acknowledges the impact of HIV/AIDS on counterparts and the policies of the donor in this regard, the director might fear he/she risks to lose further donor support.

This is the reason why Stop AIDS Now! (SAN!) has developed draft donor guidelines in order to be open and clear about donor's support to the implementation of workplace policies by local NGOs. SAN! is a partnership in the Netherlands between five organizations: one AIDS-focused organization (the Netherlands AIDS Fund) and four co-funding development agencies (NGO donors): Novib, Cordaid, ICCO and Hivos. SAN! started projects on HIV/AIDS internal mainstreaming and workplace programmes in four countries: Ethiopia, Sudan, Uganda and India.¹

To curb the HIV/AIDS epidemic, NGO workplace programmes and donor guidelines are both needed to make the process of mainstreaming HIV/AIDS successful.

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1. The Ethiopia project is described on page 14.

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