



Flyer 3: HIV/AIDS Awareness Among Staff

Purpose

The HIV/AIDS pandemic in sub-Saharan Africa has reached such crisis proportions that it affects every aspect of life. The goal of “mainstreaming HIV/AIDS” is to ensure that the impacts of HIV/AIDS are addressed and reduced in communities and within organizations, in all sectors. Many development and humanitarian organizations want to mainstream HIV/AIDS, but do not know where to start.

This flyer is part of a series that provides some lessons learned on how to mainstream HIV/AIDS, without changing an organisation’s core business. It summarises experiences of how several organisations, including Oxfam, have tried to increase staff awareness, understanding, and openness about HIV/AIDS, including how it affects them both personally and professionally. The lessons contained could help provide a starting point for others who wish to address similar issues within their own organisations.



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Overview: Oxfam Malawi

Oxfam Malawi is funded by Novib, Oxfam GB, Oxfam Hong Kong, and Oxfam Ireland, and managed by Oxfam GB. The Shire Highlands Sustainable Livelihoods Programme operates in Mulanje and Thyolo Districts. The Partner Support Programme involves organisations working across southern Malawi.

AIDS is not just ‘out there’

Many people who live and work in Southern Africa are affected by HIV/AIDS, even though some do not often talk or think about it. If organisations expect staff to address HIV/AIDS in their work, they must first be comfortable talking about the issues. They need basic, correct information on what the disease is, what it does, and how it affects different people.

When addressing HIV/AIDS, one cannot treat the issue as only affecting “other people out there.” It also affects staff inside the organisation. People affected by HIV/AIDS are not just statistics from the outside world. They are relatives, friends, and colleagues in development organisations, government, and business.

To increase their awareness of HIV/AIDS, the staff of Oxfam Malawi attended a two-day workshop in August 2000. With support from one of the few openly HIV-positive Malawians, and from a representative of the National AIDS Control Programme, they discussed facts and implications, and began to openly share their feelings about HIV/AIDS. For some, it was the first time they knowingly had sat and talked with an openly HIV-positive person.

One workshop cannot turn people into experts, nor strip away barriers of stigma or shame that accompany HIV and AIDS. But it is an important start. Fumakazi Munthali, Oxfam programme coordinator in Mulanje, noted that “what was unique was that it was actually oriented not just to raising awareness, but looking ahead to what we are going to do.”

This is one of a series of flyers designed to assist organizations in mainstreaming the issue of HIV/AIDS into their core work and internal policies, without losing their primary focus. This is Flyer 3 (29 October 2001).



Process and Content Used in Malawi: Awareness Raising among Staff

The two-day workshop included all Oxfam Malawi staff, at all levels of the organisation.

- Several days beforehand, all staff filled out a simple anonymous questionnaire, to give facilitators an idea of pre-existing knowledge, and to suggest questions and issues they wanted to discuss.
- Started with presentation and discussion of basic information, such as:
 - Statistics and medical facts: spread/progression of HIV; difference between HIV and AIDS, opportunistic infections, questions on medical treatments, long term trends.
 - Community, household and personal issues: particular susceptibility and vulnerability of women and girls; issues of AIDS orphans; care issues; effects on household labour, skills base, sale of assets, and so on.
- Testimonial from an openly HIV+ person helped participants to think about the very personal, simple, day to day issues involved in HIV transmission, and the impacts of AIDS-related illness and death.
- Meetings and discussion focused on addressing AIDS as a *personal* issue first, rather than a problem facing only “other” people “out there.” Most participants said they know at least one HIV-positive person, and agreed that they are themselves affected in various ways by HIV/AIDS.
- Reviewed “positive living,” which helps people to live longer, healthier lives through better nutrition, psychological and social support, and prompt treatment of opportunistic illnesses. This allowed staff to talk about how a livelihoods programme with no health interventions could directly support HIV/AIDS affected families. An example is helping them to produce, or earn money to buy, nutritious food.

Follow-up Actions Taken in Malawi

- One person in each office volunteered to serve as an HIV/AIDS focal person.
- Focal people created “Condom Corners” in each office, where condoms, information, and contact details of trained counsellors are easily and discretely accessible by staff and any visitors.
- Staff have regular monthly meetings, in which they identify and discuss issues stimulated by their increasing awareness of HIV/AIDS: how to reduce risks at home, how to write wills, and so on.
- All staff encourage the discussion of HIV/AIDS in other forums to ensure awareness at all levels.

Key Issues to Consider

- What is the basic knowledge people can relate to? What is a helpful combination of statistics, facts, and more personal discussions about what it means to be HIV-positive?
- Continental or even national statistics on AIDS cannot be the sole source of data; people must understand the local situation. How does the pandemic vary from place to place?
- What does it mean to be HIV-positive? Some staff were struck by having a healthy HIV-positive man speak and eat with them in the workshop, helping to overcome stereotypes, and bringing home the reality of the pandemic. Yohane Kamgwira, Oxfam’s project officer, noted, “It has assisted us as individuals, at a family level, to open up and discuss AIDS issues.” Oxfam Malawi staff noted that after participating in these meetings, they paid more attention to HIV and discussed it with more people, at work and at home, helping to increase awareness not just in the office, but also the community.
- Condom Corners do not just provide condoms. Yohane again: “We always tell community members about the condoms and start to discuss AIDS, so it also provides an opportunity to give information.”
- The issues might be difficult for some, so it would be good to have a trained counsellor participate.

OXFAM GB, SOUTHERN AFRICA
HIV/AIDS MAINSTREAMING
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Please contact us with your suggestions, comments and your own ideas concerning HIV/AIDS mainstreaming.

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