



Innovations in Health Care

Sierra Leone: teaching life skills to decrease HIV rates among young people

The problem

Like much of sub-Saharan Africa, Sierra Leone struggles with HIV prevention, particularly among young people. Poor understanding of the disease contributes to stigma against those living with HIV, and leads to continued transmission among the population. The issue is exacerbated by environmental and cultural factors including the lingering effects of Sierra Leone's decades-long civil war, which left a generation accustomed to violent and unstable surroundings, and often lacking strong family support or guidance. As a result, many young people are ill-equipped to make healthy choices in their own relationships and communities are more likely to engage in high-risk behaviors.

A national study found that less than one third of adolescents discuss personal behaviors relating to HIV and AIDS with parents or teachers, and 70% state that a individual living with HIV should not be able to continue with school or work. In addition to teaching basic information about HIV in order to reduce transmission and stigma, young people can greatly benefit from a program that provides skills for informed decision-making, peaceful conflict resolution, and empowerment.

The CRS response

To teach young people such skills, Catholic Relief Services (CRS) and its local partners began



School girls in Sierra Leone. Aminata B. Jalloh/CRS

implementing a program called Windows of Hope in 2006, and since February 2008 the project has received funding from the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria (GFATM). The project's curriculum was originally developed in Namibia in 2004 to provide adolescents with the knowledge and skills necessary to make positive life choices; CRS adapted the approach to Sierra Leone's cultural context. The program includes four phases, or "windows," each addressing a different topic. The Red Window of Hope is the final stage, targeting young people in order to enhance knowledge of HIV and decision-making skills that will ultimately help them protect themselves and their community. With the median nationwide age of first sexual intercourse at 15 years, it is important to develop these skills in children early on, before they are faced with high-risk situations.

The project uses a dual approach to reach students, with instruction in schools as well as Life Skills Centers established and staffed by the project. In addition to the benefits of the Windows of Hope curriculum and activities, these centers provide a safe space for schoolwork, socializing, sports, and advice-seeking. Through the school-based portion of the program, teachers are extensively trained in life skills concepts and participatory teaching methods. Weekly sessions are incorporated into the students' schedules. The program emphasizes active learning and participation through role-playing, group discussion and games, all intended to empower youths to make positive life choices by developing their skills, confidence and knowledge.



Project participants. Aminata B. Jalloh/CRS

Adapting to the cultural context

Although the life skills curriculum has been used successfully in many countries, a unique strength of the project in Sierra Leone is its adaptation to the local culture. The civil wars of the past decades left a significant mark on the country, and resulted in a society overly familiar with instability, violence and conflict. Children often lack positive role models and access to health services and information, and also face the constant struggles of poverty, and gender-based violence and discrimination. These issues have contributed to a generation with limited knowledge and guidance to make healthy life choices. It was therefore crucial to take these factors into account while developing and revising the project manual over the course of three years.

Results and lessons learned

An impact study conducted in 2009 demonstrated the impressive effects of the program on students and their communities. Knowledge of HIV and AIDS increased dramatically, with over 80% of children from the intervention sites identifying avoidance of shared razors and sexual abstinence as prevention methods, among others; a significant increase from the baseline data and control groups. Specifically, 92% of children in the intervention group knew that abstinence was a way of avoiding HIV, compared to a baseline of 44% and a control group response of 63%. Knowledge of mother-to-child transmission jumped dramatically from 37% to 90% among those who participated in the project. The project also dispelled many misconceptions regarding HIV and/or AIDS, thus reducing the stigma against those living with the disease.



Project participants. Aminata B. Jalloh/CRS

In addition to increasing understanding of HIV, the project has developed valuable interpersonal and decision-making skills in the participants, from which their own well-being and that of their communities have benefited. These include empathy, conflict resolution, and critical thinking—skills that are evident not only from survey responses but more importantly, from community member, teacher, and family opinions. The responses from these groups have been overwhelmingly positive, with reports of decreased violence and aggressive behavior, improved attitudes toward schoolwork, and more positive relationships between young people and adults.

With a full curriculum and large classes, the project proved most successful when sessions were appropriately incorporated into the students' and teachers' schedules. This ensured that both students and teachers were able to engage as actively and enthusiastically as possible, which is particularly important due to the participatory nature of the program.

Looking Ahead

By the time the Red Window of Hope project comes to a close in December of 2011, the project aims to have reached 30,000 adolescents and 90,000 secondary beneficiaries. The demonstrated success of the project has led to significant interest at the national and international level, among government as well as NGO leadership. The curriculum was selected by the National HIV/AIDS Secretariat (NAS) as the most comprehensive and effective method of in-school sensitization and behavior change, and is now being used by other NGOs receiving funds from GFATM Round 9 as sub-recipients. A recent survey supported by the Ministry of Education Science and Technology and UNICEF recommended that the project's approach be incorporated into the national curriculum. Additionally, the project's manual has been accepted by the GFATM for potential distribution and use in other countries to aid their HIV and AIDS and life skills education programming.