



World Library and Information Congress: 69th IFLA General Conference and Council

1-9 August 2003, Berlin

Code Number: 041-E
Meeting: 149. Free Access to Information and Freedom of Expression (FAIFE) & Libraries for Children and Young Adults - Workshop
Simultaneous Interpretation: -

The role of libraries in providing access to information for children and young adults with special attention to AIDS issues

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Abstract:

Children and young adults have suffered most from the consequences of HIV/AIDS. Creating avenues for children and young adults to access information and knowledge about HIV/AIDS is crucial to winning the war against humanities worst crisis of the modern world. This paper highlights libraries from some African countries that have made significant progress in prioritising the provision of HIV/AIDS information services and programmes. The paper finally ends with a call to the world's libraries to take action so as to prevent the catastrophe that may befall humanity.

General Overview:

On World Aids Day, most families in Africa remember their dead. Those that were so dear but succumbed to death at the hands of HIV/AIDS. The day symbolises the epitome of the struggle against humanities worst enemy. The consequences of HIV/AIDS have mostly affected children and young adults.

The Economist magazine reporting about the World Aids conference in Durban held in 2000 writes, "the impact of the global AIDS epidemic has been catastrophic, but many of the remedies are obvious. It is now a question of actually doing something". The Economist went on to note that the destruction

of young adults means that AIDS is creating orphans on an unprecedented scale and that there were 11.2m of them, of whom 10.7m live in Africa. It went on to note that vast numbers of children are infected as they are born (The Economist, July 15th-21st 2000, p.91).

According to UNICEF, more than half of those newly infected with HIV are between 15 and 24 years old- six thousand new infections each day in this age group or 4 every minute. Girls are especially vulnerable. In sub-Saharan Africa, more than two-thirds of the 8.6 million young people (aged 15-24) living with HIV/AIDS are female. A UNICEF study in the same region showed that half the teenage girls surveyed didn't know that a healthy-looking person could have AIDS.

HIV prevalence among adults and young people, target countries

	% of adults (15-59) with HIV/AIDS	% of females aged 15-24 living with HIV/AIDS*	% of males aged 15-24 living with HIV/AIDS*
Botswana	38.8	37.5	16.1
Ivory Coast	9.7	8.4	2.9
Ethiopia	6.4	7.8	4.4
Guyana	2.7	4.0	3.3
Haiti	6.1	5.0	4.1
Kenya	15.0	15.6	6.0
Mozambique	13.0	14.7	6.1
Namibia	22.5	24.3	11.1
Nigeria	5.8	5.9	3.0
Rwanda	8.9	11.2	4.9
South Africa	20.1	25.7	10.7
Tanzania	7.8	8.1	3.6
Uganda	5.0	4.7	2.0
Zambia	21.5	21.0	8.1

* Median estimates

Source: UNICEF, UNAIDS, WHO, 2002. Young People and HIV/AIDS: Opportunity in Crisis

The Commonwealth Youth Programme reports that the lack of accurate information and awareness on HIV/AIDS has created incorrect notions about the spread of the disease (Commonwealth Currents, 2002-2003, p.4). A study conducted in Kenya on Aids awareness agrees with the above report. The study found that 96% of the respondents had heard or known of the existence of the disease. However this general knowledge of the disease does not necessarily translate into essential knowledge of the disease (IFRA, 2001, p.9). This is because awareness may not necessarily have a significant relation to knowledge (Nzioka, 1994).

Specific Areas for Library Intervention:

In a press release by UNICEF Executive Director Carol Bellamy while commending the White House for its leadership in endorsing a \$15 billion emergency bill to tackle AIDS in Africa and the Caribbean today, Bellamy said, "Investing in young people is the best strategy we have today for bringing the epidemic under control." "In areas where the spread of HIV/AIDS is declining, it is primarily because young men and women are being given tools and incentives to prevent infection. Bellamy noted further that young people's decisions should be built on sound information and the ability to translate this information into healthy choices.

The above facts suggest that information and knowledge are central in the fight against HIV/AIDS and that library intervention should target children and young adults. In Uganda since 1986, a concerted effort spearheaded by the President succeeded in reducing HIV/AIDS prevalence to under 10%. Uganda's ABC (Abstain, Be faithful, Consistently use condoms) model has been successful largely because the correct information and messages have been disseminated to the people. Recently, President Museveni directed that all head teachers of primary and secondary schools should address students about HIV/AIDS at least once every week.

Despite the gains in the war against HIV/AIDS, libraries in Ugandan are yet to deliver on integrating HIV-AIDS services and programmes in their work with the same commitment and aggressive response against the epidemic as other sectors. The National Library of Uganda through the Nakaseke Multipurpose Community Telecentre and Library has been facilitating children and young adults in the rural areas covered by the project to access HIV/AIDS information and knowledge. Nakaseke has a collection of books, brochures, posters, CD-ROMs, videos and audiocassettes some of which have been done in the local language on HIV/AIDS (Uganda National Commission for UNESCO, 2002). The National Library has earmarked a programme entitled Information in support of the HIV/AIDS control programme which aims at empowering the community to participate in the prevention of HIV/AIDS as well as the care and support for those infected with and those affected by the disease (NLU, 2001). School libraries are lagging far behind in the provision of HIV/AIDS Information. As can be seen, the effort in libraries is not as widespread as would be desirable.

The Kenya National Library Service is associated with an AIDS awareness project that repackages and translates information from foreign sources (Sturges, 2001, 47). The AIDS service includes provision of books, brochures, screening of videos and seminars that target user groups who include young adults and children (Issak, 2000, 138). In countries such as Tanzania, books on HIV-AIDS are part of the general collection. In Zambia, it was reported that NGOs specialising in HIV/AIDS information tended to distribute their materials through schools and ignored other information providers. In other places, libraries use drama, poetry, singing and dancing as some of the mediums used to disseminate information on HIV/AIDS. In many other countries, however, libraries are yet to openly come out as important links in the chain for the dissemination of information and knowledge about HIV/AIDS. Part of the reasons for inaction is culture and the other is due to lack of or vagaries of National HIV/AIDS policy.

Libraries are significant information agents in meeting the demands for HIV-AIDS material. They ought to be collaborating with other organisations to build HIV-AIDS services and programmes. Libraries have a moral vindication to provide access to information for children and young adults with special attention to AIDS issues. From a theoretical standpoint, information and knowledge can be used as a form of self-empowerment, which is important in helping young adults in making decisions regarding sexual behaviour. Echoing the words of the Economist in its issue after the World Aids conference in Durban, "It is now a question of actually doing something" and its warning: "act early or you will be sorry", it is time for libraries to take action to save the next generation from extinction.

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