

Date : 19/07/2007



**Literacy to Support Healthy Living:  
CODE's experience with HIV/AIDS issues**

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**Meeting: 118 Reading with Public Libraries and School Libraries and  
Resource Centres (1)**  
**Simultaneous Interpretation: Yes**

**WORLD LIBRARY AND INFORMATION CONGRESS: 73RD IFLA GENERAL CONFERENCE AND  
COUNCIL**

19-23 August 2007, Durban, South Africa  
<http://www.ifla.org/iv/ifla73/index.htm>

***Abstract***

*The impact of HIV/AIDS on literacy and education in Africa can not be understated. For the last ten years the education sector has been the heaviest hit by the disease. As a organization committed to literacy and education, CODE initiated a project in 2001 to build on the expertise of CODE and our partners in a manner that would provide valuable support to communities struggling under the disease. The experience provided many lessons on how to move away from the traditional sectoral approach to development that has allowed our programs to become stronger, deeper and more relevant to the communities we serve. This paper provides the background to the initiative and three case studies. Lessons and recommendations for program planners and service providers are presented based on our joint experience.*

## **Literacy to Support Healthy Living: CODE's experience with HIV/AIDS issues**

**Goal:** The goal of this session is to inform literacy and information based organizations of the potential influence they have in the battle against the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

**Objectives:**

1. Provide practical examples of the transformative nature of organizations around specific issues;
2. Provide key lessons from our experience addressing HIV/AIDS; and
3. Provide recommendations to programmers on how to mainstream or scale up HIV/AIDS initiatives.

**Audience:** This session will be of interest for organizations or individuals who feel they need to do something or more about HIV/AIDS but can't identify their value added in the battle.

**CODE:**

CODE is currently implementing literacy programs in partnership with eleven organizations from nine countries in Africa and the Caribbean. Our partners include the Children's Book Project for Tanzania, the Tanzania Book Support Trust, The Ghana Book Trust, CODE-Ethiopia, the Paper Making Education Trust and the National Library Service in Malawi, Bibliothèque Lecture Développement in Senegal, Association Progresso in Mozambique, the Association pour la lecture, l'éducation et le développement in Mali and the Guyana Book Foundation. CODE's program aims to contribute to the Education For All (EFA) goals through the improvement in the quality of education for girls and boys. Our overseas program focuses on provision of children's learning materials, skills development in teaching and librarianship, promotion of a literate environment for children, and strengthening resource and education networks.

**Malawi National Library Service:**

The National Library Service (NLS) is responsible for ensuring that residents in rural and urban areas have access to reading material. This includes basic and professional education, maintenance of literacy and recreational reading. Emphasis is on services to school children and newly literate adults, while maintaining general public library services.

NLS receives book donations from the French Cultural Centre (France), the British Council of Malawi, Longman (Malawi), Dzuka Publishing Company (Malawi), Book Aid International (UK), as well as additional financial support from the World Bank, and the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) amongst others. NLS acts as the secretariat for the Malawi Book Development Council (MBDC), and through this Council it works with different actors of the book chain, including the Book Publishers Association of Malawi, the Malawi Library Association, the Malawi Writers' Union, the Copyright Society of Malawi, the Ministry of Education – Science & Technology, the Malawi National Commission for UNESCO, and local and foreign libraries.

**Background:**

The education system, particularly in Africa, is being drastically affected by HIV/AIDS, imposing a serious obstacle to the achievement of EFA goals. According to UNAIDS<sup>1</sup>, 40% of the new HIV infections happen among young people from 10 – 24 years old, down from 60% in 1997.<sup>2</sup> Of those infected in Africa, 54% are women.<sup>3</sup> The education system serves as an essential bridge to reach young people – including school-aged children – as well as their families and teachers. The education system provides an important entry point for HIV/AIDS interventions to prevent the infection, and to cope with the impact brought by the infection to the lives of people living with HIV/AIDS (PLHA). Furthermore, the education system provides regular and direct access to large populations.

This paper presents CODE's experience integrating HIV/AIDS education into our established literacy programs in Africa and the Caribbean. CODE expects that our experience and that of our partners will provide useful lessons and provide a basis for discussion on approaches to integrate HIV/AIDS into education programming and present a few considerations for scaling up activities.

Aware of the escalating effects of the HIV/AIDS pandemic in the communities in which we work, especially in Africa, CODE consulted its partners and experts in the field of education, health and HIV/AIDS in order to identify and define the best approaches to integrate HIV/AIDS interventions into our on-going literacy programs. The initial process allowed CODE to examine operational initiatives in our network and to learn from the many successes and failures of organizations working to address HIV/AIDS within the education sector and other sectors. Based on this assessment, it became evident that our partners had extensive and relevant networks to provide a system of interrelated and coordinated support for HIV/AIDS education. In 2001, CODE introduced a support mechanism for HIV/AIDS programming which builds on our expertise and that

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<sup>1</sup>UNAIDS, 2006 Report on the Global Aids Epidemic, Geneva, UNAIDS, 2006.

<sup>2</sup>UNAIDS, *Integrating HIV/STD prevention in the school setting: a position paper*, Geneva, UNAIDS, 1997.

<sup>3</sup>UNAIDS, 2006 Report on the Global Aids Epidemic, Geneva, UNAIDS, 2006.

of our partners, and that is in support and co-operation with the National HIV/AIDS Commissions and the Ministries of Educations in the countries we work.

CODE's program was designed to:

1. Encourage our partners to use their respective expertise to assist in the fight against the disease.
2. To support partners in examining ways to mainstream HIV/AIDS into their work;
3. To use partnerships that bring expertise in specific areas as a vehicle of strength in HIV/AIDS projects as they are integral to NGO operations; and,
4. To build on existing interventions, not to replicate or compete with existing programs.

During the past six years of this special initiative, CODE has provided support to eight projects in six countries in Africa. The partners along with CODE provide locally published books, pamphlets and methodologies on HIV/AIDS awareness raising for students, teachers and community members and provide training for teachers on facts about transmission, care, eliminating stereotypes, reducing vulnerability and alleviating false information. In addition, CODE has assisted with public awareness campaigns through print, radio and community animation. Most importantly, all initiatives have built on established and lasting community partnerships which are essential for changing social behaviour.

### **Case Studies:**

This section presents three examples of programs implemented by CODE and partner organizations over the last 6 years through which we have learned a great deal and continue to learn. The design, planning and implementation and monitoring of the projects have provided valuable insight into establishing effective HIV/AIDS education programs within literacy programs and on linking organizations with different skills together for a common goal.

## *Tanzania*

CODE's first direct funding to support HIV/AIDS education initiatives through this mechanism was granted in 2001-02 to the Children's Book Project (CBP) in Tanzania. The original proposal was to publish books on HIV/AIDS prevention and care to distribute throughout the network of schools the organization works with in Tanzania. CODE was excited about the opportunity to develop materials for this initiative, but then questioned the knowledge and skills of the organization to undertake the project. After negotiation, we reached a design that would build on existing materials and bring into the program the expertise of CBP in teacher training.

Funds were provided to support the purchase and distribution of 30,000 books on HIV/AIDS and for training teachers on how to integrate them into the existing curriculum and libraries. The project was able to extend its reach by identifying the cost effective publishing initiative of Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit GmbH (GTZ), the German society for technical co-operation. The GTZ initiative creates low cost, culturally and language appropriate books for use in Tanzanian schools. CBP purchased the books at a very low cost, saving resources for the training of the teachers.

With the assistance of UNICEF and the Life Skills Association of Tanzania, CBP developed modules to train teachers on HIV/AIDS and Life Skills<sup>4</sup>. The main topics included facilitation techniques, life skills, sexual and reproductive health in the primary school environment in Tanzania, HIV/AIDS facts and fiction, living with HIV and teaching methodologies. CBP brought their teaching training expertise to the design and delivery of the trainings. In total 4 5 day training sessions were held reaching 136 teachers. The modules that were developed were then used in future trainings by the Life Skills Association.

This initial program reminded us of the importance of parental involvement and overall community buy-in. Approximately a year after the books reached the schools, many

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<sup>4</sup> Life Skills training provides the recipient abilities for adaptive and positive behaviour that enables individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life. Modules are grouped around knowledge of oneself, interrelations with others and creative and critical thinking.

parents complained that their daughters were seen in public reading books about HIV/AIDS. Their concern was that the girls would be stigmatized; people would think they were promiscuous, infected, etc. Recognizing the demand for the materials and the concerns of the parents, CBP and the schools developed criteria on the circulation of the materials. After the consultations, the books were only to be used in the library or school; if books were borrowed from the library it was agreed that they must remain in school bags until the child was home.

This project has led to the mainstreaming of many other HIV/AIDS initiatives by the CBP since 2001-02 into their ongoing program supported by CODE and their other donors. While HIV/AIDS was officially made part of the primary school standard (grade) three curriculums in 2003, teaching and learning materials were in short supply in Tanzania. To support teachers in presenting this very sensitive subject, CPB has worked with the Life Skills Association in developing a comprehensive Teacher's Guide on HIV/AIDS and Life Skills. It has also purchased four reader titles on the subject, two plays and two novels. These readers are used by teachers in CBP schools which have since reported a very high lending rate on all available HIV/AIDS materials, including the readers. CBP has worked with parents, teachers, and pupils, especially girls, to reduce the stigma associated with being seen reading HIV/AIDS materials. In addition, CBP incorporates testing knowledge of HIV/AIDS during the reading competitions designed to motivate pupils to improve their literacy skills.

Key Lessons from the project:

- Organizations need to identify their specific value added to supporting programs on HIV. In the case of the CBP, their expertise in teacher training became very instrumental.
- Many resources are available in most countries on HIV/AIDS but the distribution mechanisms are often limited. By building partnerships with other organizations distribution can occur through a larger number of networks.

- Community support must be received prior to making such sensitive material available to children and youth.
- Girls, who are very vulnerable, want to learn how to protect themselves against HIV and learn how to care for those infected.

### ***Ethiopia***

After consultation with the National AIDS Commission, Ministry of Education and Ministry of Health in Ethiopia, our partner, CODE-Ethiopia approached CODE with a proposal to develop a book of life-stories of people living with AIDS (PLHA) to assist in eliminating stereotypes and to present the physical and psychological issues that members of communities throughout Ethiopia must deal with. This initiative intended to help build community support to reduce transmission and to assist its members in need of support. The books were planned to be distributed to community libraries and schools in the regions of concentration.

CODE was very favourable to the proposal. It was clear that CODE-Ethiopia had sought considerable technical support from agencies working in the education sector and in HIV/AIDS awareness/prevention. Based on our own knowledge, we recognized the potential of this program with two adjustments:

- First, CODE recommended that the program include exercises at the end of each story to facilitate discussion and thought on the issues presented by the author. Research conducted by CODE in the design of our initiative had identified the value to including exercises in this type of material to ensure appropriate comprehension of the key messages. It was a bridge between the life story and the technical information essential for avoiding the disease and to support the communities in supporting people living with HIV/AIDS.
- Second, CODE recommended that all teachers and librarians in the area of concentration be trained in how to use the materials and effectively integrate discussion into their curriculum and school/library activities. This would ensure that the teachers could support the learning process of the children and be prepared to accurately respond to questions that would arise from the material.

CODE-Ethiopia worked with the Dawn of Hope Association, an association of individuals who live with HIV/AIDS, to develop books written by persons who live with HIV/AIDS themselves. The Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health and organizations working on health and social services were involved in the selection of stories for publication. Due to stigma concerns, all contributors had the right to be anonymous, although most used their names. Thirteen inspiring and informative life stories are included in not one, but three books which were published. Rave reviews and demand from schools, regional health and education authorities attest to the value of the information provided in the books. Each book includes exercises, with notes for the teacher, to generate discussion among the readers. The books are distributed free-of-charge to schools and reading rooms. CODE-Ethiopia and the Dawn of Hope Association provided training sessions for teachers and librarians on how to use these materials – taking a life skills approach.

The result illustrated to CODE and CODE-Ethiopia the strength of partnerships between organizations across sectors in the identification of needs and the design of HIV/AIDS projects. All parties brought significant expertise to this project.

To date regional HIV/AIDS associations have approached CODE-Ethiopia to provide more books and training. The associations are even looking within their own limited budgets to fund the second print-run of the materials. CODE is working with all parties to identify effective means to scale up this program. In particular, support from the National HIV/AIDS Commission and UNAIDS is being sought. CODE-Ethiopia has also started publishing one book per local language on HIV each year in their ongoing program.

Key Lessons from the project:

- Partnerships can be developed between diverse organizations from different sectors that bring each organization's valuable knowledge and skills to the project.

- All projects must illustrate full discussion due to the high level of stigma attached to HIV.
- Books written from personal experience that are culturally, linguistically and age appropriate provide a compelling message.
- Teachers indicated that the exercises after the stories assisted them in facilitating factual discourse on the subject matter, reinforcing CODE's resolve to include them in all HIV projects of this type.
- Success brings increased demands that we can not always support.

***Malawi:***

The HIV/AIDS pandemic has caused human loss throughout the world, but more particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. According to a recent report in Malawi's *Guardian* newspaper, the first AIDS case was confirmed in Malawi in 1985 and since then the epidemic has escalated. It has upset the social equilibrium by claiming the lives of individuals who were actively involved in development activities, and hundreds of thousands of people have been affected socially and economically.

Only 64 per cent of adults in Malawi can read and write, yet literacy skills are important in the fight against the pandemic. People need access to information in order to deal with the issues and institutions that affect their everyday lives. More than ever, libraries are important places for people to practice and maintain their literacy skills and gain access to essential reading materials and information on issues such as health (especially HIV/AIDS), education, family welfare and vocational training that can significantly improve people's lives and livelihoods.

CODE supports the Malawi National Library Service (MNLS) in carrying out a program to establish and develop school libraries and procure and distribute reading materials to over 120 primary schools throughout the country. The program also develops local language materials, improves the skills of librarians, and distributes donated books from North America.

In addition to ongoing program support, CODE funded a specific project in 2005/6 to procure and distribute HIV/AIDS reading materials to primary schools. Each project school received eight local book titles related to AIDS. To further their reach, the MNLS also produced 5000 copies of two HIV/AIDS posters designed with the technical assistance of the Malawi National AIDS Commission and distributed them to all MNLS libraries and the 1,516 schools and community centres in Malawi. In an effort to mainstream HIV into the CODE program the library service published a book under the Werengani series (series of local language children's books published by the NLS) targeting the moral behavior of children. The book, in Chichewa (Malawi's national language), aims to dispel myths about HIV/AIDS among Malawian youth. Ten thousand copies were published and have been distributed throughout the network of libraries and information centres.

As a result of the expertise acquired from collaborating with the National AIDS Commission on the above CODE funded-activities, MNLS was contracted by Malawi's National AIDS Commission to strengthen 12 HIV/AIDS resource centres in the country. The centres are specifically designed to disseminate information to the public on HIV/AIDS. MNLS provides reading materials and publishes and distributes HIV/AIDS information in Chichewa and English, organizes book fairs, strengthens institutions involved in distributing HIV/AIDS information, and trains staff in library management skills. The resources and the materials are being monitored for their use and impact.

The pandemic means that a wide-range of service providers and institutions has to find innovative and effective measures to mitigate HIV/AIDS. In addition to the specific activities outlined above, the National Library Service offers various other services and support to its main library branches in 11 centres throughout the country. These include:

- The production and placement of HIV/AIDS posters to educate the public on ways to avoid becoming infected, on the causes and effects of HIV/AIDS, and on misinformation and misconceptions;
- The purchase and distribution of books and posters on HIV/AIDS;

- Free condom distribution;
- Training programs for AIDS clubs;
- Promotion of HIV resources;
- Hosting HIV/AIDS talks provided by expert organizations; and,
- Supporting HIV/AIDS youth clubs in different parts of the country.

The National Library Service is fully committed to the dissemination of HIV/AIDS information to all people in Malawi and will continue to collaborate with appropriate partners to further distribute information and reach more people living in rural and urban areas. The promotion of literacy and the support to centres and schools with appropriate reading materials and programs serve as fundamental ways to overcome the AIDS pandemic.

Key Lessons from the project:

- National AIDS Commissions, as the coordinator in the country, often have ideas and resources but need help to deliver.
- The National Library has the confidence of the people and government to provide essential information on all subject matters to the nation.
- Through the various services and libraries, national organizations can have a very large reach and through the network, provide consistent messages.

### **What have we learned?**

The special HIV initiative provided CODE with an opportunity to bring our expertise and that of our partners in program design and building effective partnerships to address a critical health issue facing communities across Africa (and in other parts of the world). Through the process we have assisted our partners in identifying ways in which their unique capacities and expertise can assist in fighting the HIV pandemic. This alone has helped organizations identify their key strengths, strengths that can be marketed to assist other organizations working in other sectors.

Specific lessons learned through the project include:

- Partnerships take various forms. A solid partnership is attained when each member brings a valuable skill to the project.
- Working in partnership expands the reach of a project.
- Organizations do not have to recreate themselves to carry out HIV/AIDS initiatives.
- Communities must always be involved in project design to ensure they acknowledge the need and will support the initiative, especially when dealing with children.
- Great care must be taken not to increase stigma or discrimination.
- Training and materials should not be delivered in isolation, rather designed and delivered together to provide broad reaching, integrated and sustained support.
- Training of front line service providers is a prerequisite for success in knowledge based programs.
- HIV projects can be mainstreamed into existing programs if there is political leadership in the organization.

As CODE and our partners explore possibilities to respond to requests to expand the reach of the program, or to scale it up, we must:

- Maintain our focus, ensure we can sustain the coverage and maintain quality;
- We must explore other funding mechanisms and partnership to sustain the program;
- Conduct a thorough evaluation to ensure we achieve the intended impact and respond to the community needs;
- Ensure the communities remain an integral partner in all processes;
- Continue to build political support;
- Respect the people writing the stories at all times;
- Identify ways to mainstream successful projects into ongoing programs; and,
- Focus on an iterative process that adapts to the changing operational environment.

CODE and our partners have learned that to be in a position to implement a project or to be able to scale up a project to cover a larger target group a great deal of strategic planning must take place. This planning involves consultation with a broad range of stakeholders including communities, teachers, librarians, government officials, National

Commissions for HIV/AIDS and other organizations with specific expertise to implement the program. It is essential to ensure the technical expertise is identified and clear memorandums of understandings that include roles and responsibilities are established in at outset. Through such planning, the roll out of the project will be more relevant and successful at the community or national level.

The case study of Malawi and Ethiopia illustrate the significance of strategic partnerships with the National Commissions on HIV/AIDS. Through these relationships the MNLS and CODE-Ethiopia were well positioned to communicate their expertise and to share the success of the interventions, leading to further partnerships to assist the countries fight against the disease. The case study from Tanzania is also important as the program involved the evolution of partnerships between civil society organizations that rallied around one issue, but bringing expertise from different sectors. All cases illustrate that for effective interventions, partnerships built on a common goal that respect different expertise have a greater likelihood to lead to successful results. This is important because in too many situations organizations try to deliver projects they do not have the organizational capacity to deliver.

CODE's experience over the last six years has illustrated that organizations can effectively develop appropriate strategies to join the fight against HIV/AIDS. Yet, our partners need the moral, technical and financial support. CODE did not mandate that partners undertake additional activities to address HIV/AIDS within the budgets already allocated to them. We opened a door to new opportunities that have shown our partner's ways to begin mainstreaming HIV/AIDS into their work. This process is allowing our partners and CODE to gain capacity and experience to further contribute to the supported countries' HIV/AIDS strategies. In addition to increasing students' awareness about HIV/AIDS, we also expect that it will enhance educational achievement by reducing the impact of HIV/AIDS on students, teachers and communities.

In conclusion, CODE's recommends that all organizations committed to development must take steps to identify what they have to offer the fight against HIV/AIDS since the

disease impacts all walks of life. By looking at our organizations, identifying the core competencies then negotiating with bodies like the national HIV/AIDS Commissions, partnerships can blossom and flourish based on the technical skills at hand and the needs of the communities or country.