



COMMUNITIES TAKE LEAD IN HIV, OTHER PANDEMIC FIGHT

By Joseph Bahingwire

As the world comes together to commemorate World AIDS Day, a group of civil society organisations believe that if communities take the lead, any epidemic or pandemic can be defeated with minimal resources for the good of humanity and enhanced health systems.

The day is commemorated under the theme *Let Communities Lead*, to recognise the pivotal role that communities have played in shaping the HIV response and global health in general.

World AIDS Day provides a chance to reflect on progress made to date, raise awareness about the challenges that remain to be overcome in order to realise the goals of eradicating AIDS by 2030, and mobilise all stakeholders to work together to ensure the success of the HIV response.

To that end, the Alliance for Women Advocating Change (AWAC), Uganda Nn'edaggala N'obuwangabwaffe (UNNB), and NOFAPHANU would like to share their experience on how they have been involved in activities aimed at combating epidemics and pandemics for many years.

With support from UNAIDS, the three organisations have held campaigns, developed community-led strategies for reducing stigma and discrimination, advocacy and provision of services to access HIV and health care services, economic empowerment, skills development, community monitoring and others.

Maclean Kyomya, the executive director of AWAC, established the institution in 2015 to promote the voices of Uganda's most vulnerable women, equitable and sustainable universal healthcare, human rights promotion and social economic resilience.

Kyomya says in 2017, AWAC established the Community Health and Livelihood



Stella Kentusi

Enhancement Group (CHLEG), a community innovative model to assist most-at-risk women in adhering to ARVs and preparation. It also ensures that there are few or no new HIV infections among them and beginning to save for themselves, their children, and other social-economic responsibilities to minimise economic hardships.

"AWAC, through CHLEG, has bought land in Luwero district where it wants to construct a hub of holistic transformation centre," she says.

Kyomya says when AWAC created CHLEG, UNAIDS provided them with support for grassroots women. This was in terms of development and committed to support capacity enhancement in districts such as Kasanda and Mubende (which were hit by the Ebola epidemic recently) and others. We also provide full counselling and assist them in getting to a medical centre for additional tests and treatment.

Kyomya went on to explain why AWAC places communities at the centre of all they do. She says this is in keeping with this year's World AIDS Day theme, *Let Communities Lead*.

"When communities take the lead, we see transitions occur, communities improve at a low cost, and there is a lot of sustainability. This is why, this year, we embraced this and got financing to respond to the Ebola outbreak in Uganda through our consortium," Kyomya



Maclean Kyomya

says. The UNAIDS funds was utilised to combat the Ebola epidemic in the districts of Kasanda, Mubende, Kampala, Wakiso, and Masaka.

The AWAC, NAFOPHANU, UNNB and other UNAIDS-supported partners launched the Community Actors for HIV Plus (CAHIV Plus) programme to focus on approaches that can strengthen HIV integrated services among vulnerable populations such as traditional healers, sex workers and people living with HIV across the country.

Since October 2022, the CAHIV Plus initiative has implemented control measures/strategies for epidemic and pandemic preparedness, mental health support and HIV/SRHR and economic resilience. This has addressed consequences of unpleasant situations such as the Ebola and COVID-19 pandemics, which impacted the health and socioeconomic standards of key populations, especially women.

"The initiative's theme is *Community Actors for HIV Plus-Uganda for Epidemics and Pandemics*. Preparedness, mental health, and economic resilience are all important."

As a result, AWAC geared up for the official launch of CAHIV Plus, which was embraced by community leaders to bring together the communities at the centre as a bottom-up approach to assess and control the



Hannington Ssewaya

rates of HIV infection among marginalised populations, particularly most-at-risk women at the grassroots and other key populations in all regions of Uganda.

Stella Kentusi, the executive director of NAFOPHANU, an organisation that brings together people living with HIV in Uganda, says that they partnered with other community-based organisations such as AWAC and UNNB. This was after realising that they are a part of the community and that whatever happens in the community, their members will come to them for solutions.

"We have discovered that many people living with HIV seek solutions from traditional healers. Therefore, traditional healers must be aware that when a person living with HIV seeks treatment from you, they should advise them to go for a checkup and receive specialised treatment.

"When you look at the majority of at-risk women, you will notice that the majority of them are HIV positive. Therefore, by working together, we ensure that they get treatment and that they do not spread it to others," Kentusi says.

She adds that because their members require a lot of social and economic support, they joined to ensure that community members, regardless of which category they serve, have access to vital services and economic

INVOLVING TRADITIONAL HEALERS IN FIGHT

The secretary general of Uganda Nn'edaggala N'obuwangabwaffe (UNNB), Hannington Ssewaya Kiwanuka, describes UNNB as a national traditional healers' non-governmental organisation that began in 2014 and uses traditional healing remedies to provide holistic healing.

He describes their functions in the community by dividing society into four hemispheres – individual health and well-being, traditional healers' well-being, persons living with HIV/AIDS, and environmental destruction because traditional healers exploit the environment. He is grateful to the WHO and UNAIDS for recognising and accepting UNNB as a health provider (consortium).

According to the research, 86% of the communities go to traditional healers for health, mental issues, luck, and other socioeconomic

assistance. This, therefore, demonstrates the importance of UNNB because traditional healers and most-at-risk women live in the same communities and some of them live with HIV. This allows them to know the exact community issues.

Ssewaya says during an Ebola outbreak in 2022, many people ran to traditional healers because health facilities were far from the village, while traditional healers live within the villages or homesteads of the communities. He says these same communities believe in traditional healers more than the medical doctors yet information collected from shrines cannot be linked to the health management system. This is a missed opportunity since the health management system never captures information collected by the traditional healers.

empowerment and support.

"The three of us came together to synergise so that regardless of how we coordinate, each category can come together and support each other.

"As a result, the social economic plan has enabled our members to receive startup funds, allowing them to become economically empowered," Kentusi says.

She says the collaboration launched the CAHIV Plus programme to assess and regulate the HIV rate in communities for social and economic development.

Kentusi emphasises the importance of integration, stating that there will be a cross-section of persons living with HIV, traditional healers and the most vulnerable women.

She suggests that religious leaders be brought on board

as well, because everyone has a relationship with the consortium as it is.

Kentusi urges everyone to take the CAHIV Plus project seriously in order to coordinate and collaborate for social-economic betterment in the community because community is concerned with development.

"It is high time we position economic empowerment programmes such as the Parish Model for Health Management. This will be a sustainable way of managing pandemics and epidemics.

As a consortium of community actors for people living with HIV, women at high risk and traditional healers, we are joining effort to shine a light on how community-led interventions are central to enabling the end of AIDS as a public health threat and other related pandemics.

