



On the Record: Against AIDS in Africa

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From the AP Editorial Desk

The subject of this new series of 'On the Record' is both grim and inspiring.

It is grim for the simple reason that it deals with the impact of the AIDS pandemic on Africa's youth. According to the UN, 22 million people have already died from AIDS. Eighty percent of those deaths were in Africa. Today, an estimated 40 million people worldwide are infected with the HIV virus, 25 million of whom live in Africa.

Young Africans are bearing the brunt of this disease. The United Nations estimates that 13 million African children have lost a parent to AIDS, and the number could rise to 30 million by the end of this decade. Half of all those infected by HIV are aged between 15 and 24. By the end of the decade, they could all be dead. In the meantime, many will face isolation and discrimination in their families, villages, and schools.

This is the stuff of horror, and subscribers to this new series of 'On the Record' will find plenty of grim reading in the dispatches that follow. But they will also read about a growing number of dynamic young Africans who are committed to battling this terrible disease.

These advocates are well known in their own countries, and they are using the occasion of International AIDS Day (December 1) to launch an Africa-wide network. Their goal is to lobby for more involvement by young people in designing and monitoring AIDS policy. Their argument is simple: young people are most affected by this disease; they have to be part of any counterattack.

The initiative for the new network comes from Youth Against Aids (YAA), a small group of African, American, and European students who have spent the last two years developing contacts in Africa. This began as an informal volunteer effort between classes. This year it has become more organized and professional, to the point that YAA now has representatives in at least 18 different African countries and another 60 associates. It is, truly, a continent-wide movement.

This year, YAA's core members have attended several high-profile UN meetings. They have also begun to identify the outlines of an AIDS policy specifically designed for youth and to draft an international plan for action.

The Advocacy Project (AP) is pleased to have assisted the development of this exciting initiative. AP redesigned and hosted the YAA website, and provided funds for YAA to visit the United Nations AIDS Program (UNAIDS) in Geneva, attend two major international conferences, and visit YAA's partners in six African countries that have been severely affected by the AIDS crisis: Botswana, Kenya, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, and Uganda.

This series of 'On the Record' is the product of their visit.

The Threat to Young People

The first thing to emerge from this series of 'On the Record' is that young people are disproportionately affected by the AIDS crisis. This is not news, but it needs to be more clearly understood.

For most people, youth is that period of one's life when everything seems possible and the future holds no fears. It is a time of experiment and exploration, when people discover their sexuality and become independent. In the right context, these first steps toward adulthood can be remarkably rewarding; in the wrong context they can be a death sentence.

What is the wrong context? The answer is ignorance, poverty, breakdown of the family, racism, wrong-headed government, fearful parents, superstition, and gender inequalities.

Time and again in the pages that follow, readers will understand that what makes young people vulnerable to AIDS is not their age but the adult world in which they live.

Of course, a young person bears the ultimate responsibility for engaging in unprotected sex, which is by far the most common way to acquire the HIV virus. But even this is not so simple. In many parts of Africa, young women have no control over their sexual activity - they do what they are told. Throughout the world, 100 million children under the age of 18 are working on the streets, and many sell their bodies just to survive.

Street children are just one of the many groups that live in a coercive environment that leaves them very few options. This is fertile territory for the AIDS virus. It helps to explain the appalling statistics quoted above.

Formidable Networkers

If young people are vulnerable to AIDS, they are also remarkably well equipped to keep the disease at arm's length.

They bring immense enthusiasm and energy to a task, as we at AP have seen from working with our young partners from Youth Against AIDS. Young people are ready to volunteer their time and energy without expecting financial rewards or looking beyond the immediate future. They can be immensely focused.

They can be highly effective communicators. Few people convey what it means to be HIV-positive as well as Charlotte Mjele, the YAA representative in South Africa who is profiled in the fourth issue of this series. Last year, another young South African, 11 year-old Nkosi Johnson, moved an international conference in Durban to tears when he asked delegates to treat those with the infection like normal people. Nkosi contracted the HIV virus in the womb and defied all expectations by living until this year. Leaders around the world mourned his death this summer.

People like Charlotte and Nkosi represent a deadly threat to AIDS - not just because of their communications skills, but because they are brilliant at conveying a message and networking. Again, we would look no further than our friends from YAA and the way they have painstakingly built their network in Africa.

Ignored Asset

At the same time, any review of international action on AIDS will quickly conclude that these youthful assets are not being used in the fight against AIDS.

This is all the more surprising because so many advances have been made since the virus was first identified in the early 1980s.

Take medicine, for example. Antiretroviral drugs like AZT have been found to slow the onset of the disease and kill the virus completely in most cases of transmission from mother to infant. The main problem here has been expense: the people and governments that most need these drugs cannot afford them.

But even this may be shifting. Just recently, at the November world trade summit in Qatar, governments agreed in principle that governments could override patents and purchase cheaper generic drugs in the interests of combating a public health emergency like AIDS. When governments agree to chip away at the sanctity of intellectual property (patents) - a cornerstone of international trade - things are really beginning to change.

Huge advances have also been made in better understanding the close connection between human rights and the spread of AIDS. Simply put, if people are persecuted for having AIDS, they will not disclose their infection or seek treatment. This will greatly increase the chances of their spreading the virus, not to mention violate their basic human rights. The United Nations has

drafted a series of guidelines that are now taken very seriously. These help governments protect the rights of those with the HIV virus. The link between AIDS and human rights is the theme of the fourth issue of this series.

It is also clearly understood that gender plays a major part in spreading AIDS. Women and girls are extremely vulnerable in an environment that undervalues their role and turns a blind eye to gender discrimination and sexual violence. This is the subject of Issue 7.

But in all this welter of analysis and discussion, very little attention is paid to the special needs and capacities of young people. There has been almost no major push to understand the disease from the perspective of young people, to listen to young people, or to develop youth-oriented policies - nationally or internationally.

The burden is left with teachers and parents - and too often they are left to flounder in embarrassment and ignorance.

On the Frontline of the Fight Against AIDS

This series of 'On the Record' will be sent out by email to subscribers over the next few weeks. The next two issues (2 and 3) will set the scene and explain the development of Youth Against AIDS from an idea into a network. Thereafter, each issue will mix themes with countries.

The series focuses on six African countries that are on the frontline of the battle against AIDS. The first is South Africa. More South Africans are infected with the HIV virus than any other country in the world, but the government has questioned whether AIDS is even a medical condition. This official skepticism creates an extraordinarily difficult climate - and even physical dangers - for AIDS activists. The standoff has major implications for the campaign against AIDS worldwide.

Expressed as a percentage of the population, Botswana is under an even greater threat from AIDS than South Africa, in that over one-third of all Botswanans are infected.

The rate of infection in Nigeria, the third country to be profiled, is still low as a percentage of the population. At the same time, it is large in terms of absolute numbers, and the risk of transmission is clearly great in Nigeria's overcrowded cities.

Senegal is one of Africa's success stories: the rate of infection is still around two percent in a population of ten million. Research done by YAA this summer reveals that one reason for Senegal's success is that the government is engaged and active. Another reason is that religious leaders - mostly Muslim - are tolerant and open to the use of condoms and sex education. This is not to say Senegal is without problems. Indeed, precisely because so few people are HIV-positive, very little is done for people living with AIDS. For those unfortunate enough to be infected, Senegal's blessing is something of a curse.

The remaining countries, Kenya and Uganda, are a study in contrasts. Uganda's President Yoweri Museveni took the bold step of acknowledging that AIDS was ravaging his country in

the 1980s and appealed for international help. He then reorganized his government to meet the threat head on and created a national AIDS control program in 1986. Ugandans took their cue from their president and the rate of infection began to fall. It peaked at 30 percent of the entire population in 1993 and stands at 12 percent today.

In sharp contrast, the Kenyan government preferred to deny the threat during the 1990s, and it was not until November 1999 that President Daniel Arap Moi declared a national emergency. This short-sighted attitude was one reason why Lydia Bosire, a young Kenyan student, concluded that young Africans needed to work together to put pressure on their governments and decided to set up Youth Against AIDS. The story of how this happened is told in the third issue of this series.

The Contribution of African Writers

We hope that three things will emerge from this series. First, it will enable YAA to publicize the work of its African members and attract new members. Second, the entire network will begin to get a clearer sense of how youth can contribute to the fight against AIDS by looking at these six African countries. This in turn will help the network to define its future work.

The authors of the series are Ms. Bosire, from Kenya; Leo Metcalf, who met Ms. Bosire at college in the United Kingdom and has proved the driving force behind setting up the YAA network; and Adam Frankel, who is in his third year at Princeton University.

Several African writers have assisted these three in preparing the material for this series. They include a group of professional journalists in Nigeria, who have formed a group called Journalists Against AIDS.

The profiles from Kenya have been written by John Kamau. Mr. Kamau directs Rights Features, a well-respected group in Nairobi that has worked with several international human rights campaigns, including the Global March for Children and the International Campaign to Ban Landmines. Steven Candia and James Odongo wrote the articles on Uganda. Ibrahim Ndiaya contributed two pieces from Senegal.

The involvement of these African journalists has given this series added authenticity. It is, without doubt, an African perspective.

None of the three principal writers from YAA went to Africa with any particular analysis in mind. Their aim, rather, was to bring the fight against AIDS alive and to put a face to some of their African partners.

It is certainly not the purpose of the series to attempt an ambitious analysis or to monitor government policies. That, hopefully, will be a job for the YAA network in the months to come. To the extent that the series presents analysis of themes, it has drawn on other writings and UN reports.

The Web Package: Newsletter, Website, and Web Map

The Advocacy Project has had no hand in commissioning or selecting the subjects. Our task has been simply to offer our newsletter 'On the Record' as a vehicle and present the material in an appropriate form that is easy to read. AP has also drafted an introduction for each issue that places the material in context and summarizes the principal theme of the issue.

Many of the profiles are quite lengthy. As a result, most are summarized in this email edition of 'On the Record.' Readers are invited to visit the YAA website for the full, unedited versions and for a country-by-country analysis of policies in each of the six countries that the YAA group and their partners have prepared. Magatte Wade from Senegal, another active and talented member of the YAA network, translated the website into French.

Readers will also be able to visit a map of the YAA African network, which has been specially designed by Mapmuse, based in Washington DC, with help from Ruby Seinrich, a web designer who assists AP. Visitors will be able to use the map to meet YAA's African members. One click will take them to a country and bring up a profile and photo.

One issue, which is scheduled for publication just before Christmas, will look at how YAA is developing links between young African AIDS activists and northern universities. This is one of the most exciting aspects of the YAA initiative. YAA chapters are emerging in universities as far apart as Princeton and Edinburgh.

Several of these northern YAA chapters are hoping to support projects proposed by the YAA representatives in Africa. But some will also launch their own initiatives. At the suggestion of Mr. Frankel, one student has started a YAA chapter in Princeton University. She wants to start a program for providing clean needles to drug addicts in the state of New Jersey. The use of dirty needles spreads the HIV virus, but the state government has opposed any needle exchange programs for fear that they might appear to condone drug-taking. It is the same sort of moral squeamishness that hampers government efforts in Kenya, even if the problem in Kenya is sex rather than drugs.

This is one more example of how the common threat from AIDS is bringing young people together across continents. It also demonstrates the power of international networking.

The Future for YAA

Where will YAA go from here? Clearly, that is for the YAA members to decide. They will be facing several practical challenges, familiar to all nascent campaigns: How do they organize and raise funds without creating a large bureaucracy that blunts their drive and commitment? How do they unify their disparate network, which is now spread over an entire continent, without setting up a cumbersome organizational structure?

Will they focus their efforts on lobbying at international meetings or locally? How can they move from one level to the other? How can they develop a common methodology for monitoring the policies of governments? How can they get the attention of policy makers?

As one might expect, they already have ideas, and there is no shortage of work to be done. Some governments such as South Africa are, as was noted above, in denial. Others, like Uganda, have made remarkable strides but need to remain vigilant. The international community made some ambitious pledges at the Special Session of the UN General Assembly in June 2001. It must now be held to account for those pledges.

In terms of their own plans, the YAA partners are already talking of producing an Africa-wide newspaper for young people in Africa, modeled on the successful Ugandan publication 'Straight Talk.' There will be no shortage of financial supporters once they become better known.

Our guess is that their network will remain pliable and effective as long as YAA draws from, and supports, the work of its African partners rather than trying to impose an artificial structure. That is one of the key lessons to emerge from our work at The Advocacy Project over the last three years.

But all that lies in the future. For the moment, we at The Advocacy Project are pleased and proud to have been able to support a unique initiative. YAA and its members may be young in years, but they are old in experience and wisdom.

Here, then, is their story.