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"Do U Know?"

Using ICT to Fight HIV/AIDS

Von Anthony Bloome

Since early 2000, World Links and its project partners have been running the AIDSWEB project in secondary schools in Africa using information and communications technology (ICT) to promote HIV/AIDS education and prevention activities. Early results from the project suggest that technology can play a complementary and useful role in helping combat this horrible pandemic.

"The most important message should be that we should challenge and fight this pandemic relentlessly. We should be as fearless as Chantika Nkhoma who said 'I have no fear. I live with a killer already.' Infected or affected, we all have a responsibility to play our part in eradicating this scourge." (Ama Ababio, Zimbabwe teacher)(1)

According to the Joint United Nations Program on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), African countries carry an HIV/AIDS burden 100 times that of industrialized countries. Tens of millions of adults live with HIV in Sub-Saharan Africa and the prevalence rate of youths (ages 15-24) infected with the disease is alarming. In Zimbabwe, over 25% of the adult population harbor HIV and an estimated 23 - 25% of female youth and 9 -13% male youth are effected. In Botswana, with the highest adult HIV prevalence rate in the world, 35.8% of the adults. 32 - 36% of the female youth, and 13-18% of the male youth are affected. In virtually any country where15% or more of all adults are currently infected with HIV, at least 35% of boys now aged 15 will die of AIDS (2).

The overall HIV prevalence rate among African youth shows the continuing need for HIV/AIDS educational prevention activities targeted specifically for the young people who are not yet affected.

HIV/AIDS and ICT

The use of information and communications technologies (ICT) complements other Information Education and Communications (IEC) campaigns designed to reach youth. The same technology resources - e-mail, CD-ROMs, listserves and the World Wide Web - that can

link HIV/AIDS educators and activists around the world, also holds great promise for reaching youth, who typically embrace the use of the technology for entertainment, learning and communication when given access to these resources.

Several recent reports have provided highlights on the use of ICT to combat HIV/AIDS. In November 2001, a consultant for the International Development Research Council produced a comprehensive report showcasing several pilot project activities in this area. Among other conclusions, the author recommended the importance of teaching girls and young women how to use the Internet (3). Other evidence also suggests that women with the mastery of almost any level of ICTs increase their self-esteem and has spillover effects into other activities that work toward poverty alleviation, an important element in decreasing their susceptibility to economic situations which put them at greater risk of catching HIV/AIDS (4).

Also in November 2001, a presentation by Michael Kelly, a well-respected HIV/AIDS researcher working in Zambia, highlighted notable projects concerning the use of ICT as applied to the challenge of HIV/AIDS in Higher Education Institutions in Africa (5).

Featured in both reports were references to the World Links Program and AIDSWEB project using ICT to reach youth in several African countries through HIV/AIDS prevention and information gathering activities.

World Links and the AIDSWEB Project

As a pilot intervention to explore the impact of using ICT for HIV/AIDS education, the World Links Program, a collaborative partnership between the World Bank Institute's World Links for Development (WorLD) Program and the World Links 501(c) (3) Organization, has been working with students and teachers in Africa since early 2000. By tapping into their network of secondary schools (over 950 schools in 26 developing countries equipped with ten networked computers and connected to the Internet via dial-up, lease line or wireless connection) with nearly 200,000 teachers and students trained in the use of ICT for teaching and learning since 1997, and fostering school-community partnerships, World Links is helping teachers, students, and their surrounding communities explore issues of HIV/AIDS prevention and care through activities using Internet, e-mail and CD-ROMs.

The Online Project: World Links and the World Bank's AIDS Campaign Team for Africa (ACTAfrica) designed the initial online collaborative project on HIV/AIDS prevention and care. In early 2000, with project support from Wired magazine, fifteen schools in Ghana, South Africa, Uganda and Zimbabwe participated in the project using the ICT resources and training available at the World Links' Internet Learning Centers (ILCs) established in schools and community learning centers in each of those four countries (6).

In 2001, twenty-five schools – with 200 teacher and student participants – were involved in the online exchange. In the current project, which will run through May 2002, over thirty schools – with about 300 teacher and student participants – enrolled in the project to

exchange questions, answers and discussion via the project's moderated e-mail listserve.

This year's project has also been enhanced through a growing international partnership and new country participants. New project partners include iEARN, Schools Online, Education Development Center, and the United Negro College Fund's Specials Projects program. Additionally, schools in five new countries – Botswana, Kenya, Nigeria, the US, and Zambia – have also joined the online project.

Project Activities: Once signed up to participate, each student and teacher fills out an online introductory questionnaire, which is also used by the project facilitator – a reproductive health consultant – as a pre-test. Then, participants work through five educational goal activities (each, with the exception of a the cultural exchange module, taking a month to complete). Through the five modules (i.e., Cultural Exchange, Basic Facts of HIV/AIDS, The Importance of HIV/AIDS, The Challenge of HIV Prevention, and Social Action), teachers and students explore myths and misunderstandings, conduct research, and discuss how they can prevent HIV in their own lives and communities. The Social Action component is an important project feature encouraging students and teachers to develop an HIV/AIDS action plan through which the students can make an attempt to impact on their community. Some social action plans included working with Parent-Teacher Associations, establishing income-generating projects for youth, and inviting testimonies from people living with HIV/AIDS (PWAs).

Educational Material: One project priority is to get more and better HIV/AIDS educational materials into schools. World Links is working on two fronts to source this information for project participants. The first, producing and disseminating a CD-ROM with relevant HIV/AIDS websites drawn from already existing online material (e.g., UNAIDS, CDC, WHO) for schools with slow or no Internet connections; the second effort, helping to adapt high-quality and locally produced print-based HIV/AIDS educational material for electronic dissemination via CD-ROM and website.

A pilot example of this latter activity has been developed through a partnership with a Zimbabwean NGO, the Training and Research Support Center (TARSC), whose dynamic adolescent reproductive health activity pack, "Auntie Stella", is now available at www.auntiestella.org and features thirty question and answer cards, based on the problem page letters to magazines "Agony Aunts" and radio helplines which teenagers identified as a popular source of information.

With funding from the US Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, over thirty teachers, NGO and government project participants were able to attend a HIV/AIDS Materials Review Workshop in Cape Town, South Africa, in July 2001. Along with sharing and reviewing HIV/AIDS materials, participants developed criteria lists for the materials they wanted, and for putting such materials in electronic format (e.g., website and CD-ROM).

As a follow-up to this workshop, one teacher from each of the eight participating African countries came to Washington, D.C. from February 14-18, 2002. The AIDSWEB D.C. Cultural Exchange Visit, organized by the United Negro College Fund Special Projects program, included home stays and school visits with Washington, D.C. teachers (whom they had met at the Cape Town workshop) and a series of informational meetings with a variety of D.C.-based NGO, local and international institutions dealing with HIV/AIDS prevention and care activities, including Advocates for Youth, Whitman Walker Clinic, United Methodist Church, National Institute of Health, Friends and Families, and USAID.

Project Impact & Evaluation: Teachers who have participated in the project report that it has raised awareness of HIV/AIDS issues among their students, enhanced research skills, helped the integration of HIV/AIDS education into school curricula and helped emphasize the role of the teacher as a facilitator (7).

Strive Mazunga, a student from Zimbabwe, commenting on his participation in the project, said: "This project has really taken me to another stage in my life. I've learnt to help any of my friends and relatives whenever they are in need. With this project I've learnt how people take this issue of the pandemic. Some of the things, which I didn't know like the other secrets of the spread of HIV, have now been made clear with my participation in this project." (8)

From Namilyango College in Uganda, after the Challenge of HIV Prevention online project activity, where the students went out in their community and interviewed various authorities: "We really liked the field visit that we made to various places, finding more about the opinions of other people on HIV/AIDS....moving to places we had never gone to before like entering a traditional shrine...being in control interviewing elders and challenging them...being asked our opinion on the struggle [against AIDS] by our elders." (9)

Another example of positive project impact: teachers and students at West African Secondary School in Ghana have linked up with AIDS Action Ghana, a national NGO, to train peer educators as part of the AIDSWEB project.

Expanded Activities and Next Steps: Recent funding from the World Bank's Knowledge Economy Program is enabling World Links to further expand the HIV/AIDS and ICT pilot activities in Africa to include:

- an **AIDSWEB Social Action Website Design Competition** which promotes the development of youth-led website design teams to highlight exemplary examples of school and community HIV/AIDS prevention activities (forty schools from five African countries registered for the competition's April 30th deadline)
- **HIV/AIDS and ICT Integrated Training Material**
  which will integrate World Links' computer and Internet literacy training material with HIV/AIDS examples - and be targeted for delivery by World Links-trained teachers to HIV/AIDS-oriented NGOs and peer educator accessing the school-based telecenters in the after-school hours, and, HIV/AIDS and

- **ICT Brainstorming Workshop**
  , which will take place in Kampala, Uganda in May 2002 with representatives from Ministry of Education, Health, school heads, HIV/AIDS and youth-oriented NGOs to explore AIDSWEB and other HIV/AIDS and ICT project activities and consider other innovative uses of ICT to combat HIV/AIDS.

Reaching Rural Youth

Notwithstanding the activities described above, most African youth in the short- and medium-term will not be able access the vast amounts of information available on the Internet. Most countries in sub-Sahara Africa are still challenged by low Internet and computer penetration per capita. There is about one Internet user for every 200 people in Africa (and this is heavily skewed because of the higher Internet penetration in South Africa), compared to a world average of about one user for every 15 people, and a North American and European average of about one in every 2 people (10). While this limited access currently poses a significant barrier to youth-targeted ICT-based educational campaigns, such as the AIDSWEB project, ongoing ICT initiatives to bridge the digital divide are also demonstrating how HIV/AIDS resources can be creatively delivered to rural communities. For example, fully three-quarters of the four hundred or so World Links Program Internet Learning Centers in Africa are located outside of the capital cities and innovative technologies such as mobile van telecenters and the use of satellite technology for connecting rural schools with high-speed Internet connectivity are both being pilot-tested by the program. (11)

These rural youth are at the front lines to combat HIV/AIDS in their communities. Internet and other ICT resources might play a contributing role to linking these future leaders – and prompting new youth activism.

A demonstration of this newly awakened activism can be seen in an AIDWEB's participating teacher's e-mail note to the project facilitator after attending the International AIDS Conference in Durban 2000. The subject line on his email reads, "Do U Know?" Part of the message follows: "Dear Sister Ann, No you don't. Ever since I returned from the AIDS Conference in Durban, SA, things have not been the same for me. Not even a moment passes by with me thinking of the HIV/AIDS pandemic and SA. When I reflect on some of the issues raised at Durban, it takes me a long time to get to school. I really feel like leaving the classroom and joining in the fight against this pandemic disease. I guess the fight is now on with the silence partly broken. Warm regards, Your HIV/AIDS Trainee, Chris Kwei, Ghana"

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