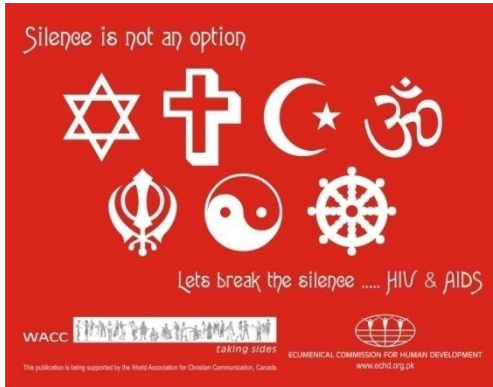




Ecumenical Commission for Human Development

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Positive Voices for change to fight against HIV & AIDS



In 2009-2010, the World Association of Christian Communication (WACC) and the Ecumenical Commission for Human Development embarked on a project "Fostering AIDS Initiative that Heal" (Project FAITH) for reducing discrimination and stigmatization towards HIV positive people by discouraging the labeling of people living with HIV and AIDS as immoral and help to religious community courageously face the challenges of the epidemic by providing information and knowledge and deepen understanding of HIV and AIDS. The project involved religious community, people living with HIV & AIDS, young leaders and local media personnels at Lahore Pakistan.

Pakistan at present is categorized as 'Low Prevalence High Risk' country for HIV virus infection. While HIV prevalence appears to be low in Pakistan at present, the presence of a number of vulnerabilities and risky behavioral patterns suggest the need for urgent, prioritized, and coordinated action to curtail the emergence of a widespread epidemic. Poverty, gender inequalities and low levels of education and literacy all contribute to HIV vulnerability in Pakistan. Other, related factors that can increase vulnerability at the individual level include unemployment, social exclusion or marginalization, physical and/or mental abuse, and gender-based discrimination.

Presently the overall sero-prevalence of HIV among IDUs is 15.8% and among MSWs it is 1.5% - 1.8%. In line with the epidemic trend, there has been a renewed focus by the Government and Development Partners towards rapidly scaling up prevention and service delivery programs for high risk groups particularly IDUs, nevertheless coverage is still a major challenge facing the AIDS Programs.

HIV and AIDS is a relatively new sector in Pakistan. The response to the epidemic at all levels has been too slow. Though government and civil society organizations started their involvement and concern in early nineties, still the scale and quality of these interventions remained debatable. The reasons are not difficult to identify. Lack of reliable epidemiological data, reliable information about the problem itself, access to information, absence of technical expertise to design suitable interventions, deficient technical skills to implement the projects and above all the stigma and discrimination attached with HIV and AIDS made it almost impossible for the interventions to succeed. Practically there has no advocacy at the grass root level for the rights of people living with HIV and AIDS and especially very few have dared to speak for the rights of vulnerable and marginalized groups.

Right to information is one of the basic human rights and lack of access to basic knowledge and information about HIV and AIDS is one of the contributing factors for increase in high risk behaviors. Moreover easily available information helps in reduction of stigma and discrimination.

Effective prevention and control of HIV and AIDS largely depend upon effective communication of information about the epidemic but due to our cultural and social norms it is still considered as taboo in the society which



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result the discrimination against people living with HIV and AIDS. For this purpose we need to communicate authentic, reliable and right based message about HIV & AIDS and effective communication strategy.

Ecumenical Commission for Human Development is Christian, independent ecumenical relief and development agency, focuses on advocacy for policy reforms and enabling environment for HIV and AIDS interventions. We bring a positive change in attitude of masses, promote safe practices and reduce high risk behaviors through behavioral change communication initiatives and also advocates vulnerable and marginalized groups i.e. female sex workers, transgender community, most at risk young people and people living with HIV & AIDS, which are at greater risk of being infected with HIV and AIDS and raises their voice at all important decision making and policy forums.

We are facing number of challenges that Pakistan is a frontline state of war against terrorism and government play an active role and a huge amount of annual budget is being spent on this war. Very limited financial resources are available for health sector especially prevention and control of HIV and AIDS.

Last year, Pakistan faced devastating flood in the history. The flood badly hit many areas in all provinces of the country. More than 2,000 lives have been lost, considerable numbers are still missing and millions are displaced. Government and other agencies are busy in paying full attention to rehabilitate the victims of flood and the war against terrorism and the funds are transferred for purchasing food, shelters and other non-food items for affectees.

Cultural and other restrictions on focusing sexual transmission of HIV and promotion of condom use for STIs, IEC messages through mass media are inadequate and the civil society organizations lack the enabling environment that is so crucial for an effective response.



Condom use is one of the single most important factor in an effective and successful response to HIV/AIDS. Although condoms are promoted as an integral part of service delivery to target populations, usage levels are woefully low. Religious leaders and congregations of different faiths are still reluctant to accept that there is a danger of a generalised epidemic in the country. Due to limited information and knowledge, they still discuss to talk about sex and related issues are considered as a sin.

Ecumenical Commission for Human Development, a faith based national non-governmental organization sought such a solution through information, education and communication (IEC). The proposed solution was three-folds i.e. 1) involve and sensitize religious leaders, theological seminary students, young leaders, women rights groups and people living with HIV and AIDS for reducing stigma and discrimination through orientation meetings, IEC material dissemination, interfaith dialogue and interactive theatre. 2) advocacy and access VCT services to people living with HIV and AIDS. 3) capacity building of religious community, young leaders and people living with HIV and AIDS to serve as resource persons and later become an agent of Change. Through these activities Ecumenical Commission for Human Development encourage religious leaders to pay full attention on the disease and help to community and positive people to adopt and maintain positive living practices, increase the disclosure of HIV status, if s/he is living with disease, and improve community involvement in HIV/AIDS services.



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ECHD implement this project at the grassroots level, we have good relationships with local religious and young leaders and other civil society organizations active in the area. ECHD organized a consultative forum in which to discuss project strategies to avoid the duplication of services and hear recommendations for how to best implement project activities, gain new ideas, other NGOs the need to increase their activities in relation to HIV/AIDS and establish working relationships with local leaders, whose support became invaluable to the project.

Soon after, HIV & AIDS sensitization was carried out through interfaith dialogues on communication and leadership skills, basic concept of the disease, strategies for reducing stigma and discrimination of AIDS, faith based approach to prevention and control of HIV & AIDS, People living with HIV & AIDS and role of religious community – over eight dialogues were conducted in five union councils of Lahore reaching over 337 individuals. These dialogues aimed to share and explore such values, religious teaching, cultures and tradition for human dignity and respect, highlighting issues surrounding stigma, the care and support for HIV/AIDS patients and the community role in HIV/AIDS prevention.

Performing art is a tool to raise an awareness for the prevention of HIV and AIDS among target communities along with young people and religious leaders. Total of eight performances both at World AIDS Day and International Candle Light Memorial Day organized and 1176 individuals participated. These performances raise awareness and reduce stigma and discrimination and also challenge to local communities and religious leaders to take appropriate steps and action to help people living with HIV and AIDS. These performances also encourage to religious leaders to change their behavior and make love and caring response towards people living with HIV and AIDS.

The documentary “Faith in Action” is comprises on the serial of the sermons of religious leaders in response to reducing stigma and discrimination and prevention of the disease at local level. It monitors the activities and the efforts in such area, necessary to mobilize as many leaders as possible for more proactive effective policies, and creating enabling environment for People Living with HIV and AIDS. Religious leaders are thought to be the most influential in changing the hatred in the current religious discourse, into a more positive and humane discourse, through their heavenly based messages. The documentary was also aired at local cable networks in target areas of the project and the community respond it positively. The documentary also provide short detail on the life of Mr. Muhammad Asim (living with HIV/AIDS) and his family for speak out on AIDS. More than three hundred thousands people watched this documentary and shared us their feed back.



Capacity Building Training Workshops and advocacy seminars with young and religious leaders, were conducted involving people living with HIV and AIDS and women, with a slogan to fight against HIV and AIDS, explaining safety measures and preventive stigma and discrimination methodologies. More than 645 young and religious leaders, women and media personnel alongwith people living with HIV and AIDS attended these workshops to promote empowering the vulnerable and providing them with increased self-esteem, healthier lifestyle and sustainable development

Many lessons were learned during this project that interfaith dialogue and theatre performances are the most effective communication tool in HIV/AIDS sensitization. Interactive theatre leave deep impressions on the minds of the audience, theatre is difficult to forget.



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Local young and religious leaders are integral part of the project. Their involvement is not only important in combating ignorance on HIV/AIDS and stigma, but also in providing People living with HIV & AIDS with the confidence to openly disclose their status. Partnering with local leaders builds confidence within the community and allows for the sustainability of the program.

ECHD also learned that reducing stigma and discrimination related to HIV/AIDS campaign be a comprehensive and realistic communication strategy that based on country specific research and grounded in local cultural realities and is executable.

Furthermore, actions carried out in future use ongoing research to identify target audiences, content of messages and the modalities to convey such messages, via mass media (advertisements, TV and radio shows, drama serials, documentaries on the life of People living with HIV and AIDS, newspaper supplements, website site, e-campaign, social media networks) and enhance communication at all levels.

We also learned that activities such as community level messages, workshops and training for media producers, newspaper staff, community activists etc to be arranged or recruiting partners such as NGOs and/or educational institutions.

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