

Spotlight

Children neglected in the HIV response

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An article from the HDN Key Correspondent Team

In June, 2007, the Executive Director of the United Nations Joint Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) Peter Piot admitted that children had been neglected in the fight against HIV.

Officiating at the Joint Learning Initiative on Children and AIDS (JLICA) in the USA, he said there were no comprehensive statistics on, or programmes tackling, the effects of HIV on children.

In Zambia, during the closure of the ninth Zambia National AIDS Conference (ZNAC) on October 10, 2007, former Zambian Health Minister, Nkandu Luo, said a great deal of progress had been made in the treatment of adults but little had been done for children.

The impact of HIV on children is finally becoming recognized as a problem in Zambia and the rest of the world.

An estimated 1.1 million people are living with HIV in Zambia. According to the National HIV/AIDS/STI/TB Council (NAC)'s Comprehensive Care Package for Managers and Supervisors, 150,000 of the overall figure are children.

Between 20,000 and 30,000 babies are infected every year and HIV-related diseases are the leading cause of infant and childhood mortality. Approximately 200 children infected with HIV die for every 1000 births, compared with 100 children who are not HIV positive.

The prevalence of HIV is also high in older children. UNAIDS says that the great majority of children aged between 15–24 years living with HIV are in Southern Africa, with about 80% of those in Zambia and Zimbabwe.

Professor Luo stressed that it was important for Zambian civil society to realize that children need to be considered in all initiatives against HIV.

"We need to look closely at issues of prevention of mother to child transmission and make sure that we get the children helped in this situation," she said.

She highlighted the need to develop appropriate policies and action on poverty alleviation, food security and alcohol and substance abuse. She added that the spread of HIV was further exacerbated by human trafficking which mostly affects orphans and vulnerable children.

Professor Luo called for policy and legal reforms on issues such as child sexual abuse, child labour and human trafficking.

Harmful cultural practices that discriminate against women and children should be cast aside to pave the way for progressive development in the efforts against the HIV epidemic in Zambia. Luo appealed for the government to play a leading role in ensuring that sexual reproductive rights and child rights are not only reflected in the law but that they are upheld and enforced.

Addressing the civil society organizations that attended the conference, Professor Luo emphasized the need to create more information dissemination materials in conjunction with coordinated communication strategies which avoid conflicting statements.

“We should advocate for paediatric interventions for children and make treatment accessible to all people,” she concluded.

Zambia National AIDS Network (ZNAV) Executive Director, Elizabeth Mataka, (also United Nations Special Envoy on HIV/AIDS in Africa) observed with some optimism, during the closure of ZNAC, that there has been a shift in the way people are dealing with the pandemic.

“We see that people understand that HIV cannot be fought by one group of people. Here, you see medical doctors and us, from the social sector, coming together. It never used to be like this some 10 years ago. We kept doing things in isolation. Now, there is great cooperation amongst various organizations, especially government.”

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