

Strengthening HIV/AIDS Leadership For Improved Service Delivery

One of the most challenging issues in working on ICT4D has been to influence people, at all levels, policy makers as well as development actors to see ICTs as part and parcel of their development efforts. Most plan for ICTs separately and see it as a preserve of the more technically inclined in the organization or department.

In order to mainstream ICTs in development OWA partners with communities and organizations to identify crucial issues affecting them where ICTs can add value and make a difference.

HIV/AIDS is a cross cutting issue that affects communities globally but more so in Sub Sahara Africa. There is no community or organization that is not affected by this scourge and so OWA identified this as an entry point for their ICT intervention, particularly combining the aspect of 'voice' and 'mainstreaming'.

Following an assessment of grassroots organizations in several provinces in Zambia, OWA discovered that most citizens felt marginalized and generally not consulted on decisions regarding HIV/AIDS. Although Zambia has recorded some successes in the fight against the pandemic in areas such as awareness raising, a number of areas common in all provinces were raised and needed attention. Some these were;

1. Voluntary Counseling and Testing (VCT) services inadequate
2. ART inadequate and not available in most rural areas
3. Stigma and discrimination still high
4. Inadequate and sometimes lack of trained personnel in rural health centres.

In order to respond to the above, OWA designed a programme with the communities that sought to increase citizens' demand for accountability as well as strengthen Members of Parliament leadership role in HIV/AIDS service delivery.

The overall goal was to influence the formulation and implementation of HIV/AIDS policy framework and service delivery and to fight stigma and discrimination through ICTs.

The project was conducted in eight constituencies in two provinces in Zambia. The eight districts are all quite far from the city of Lusaka with the furthest Isoka being almost 900km from away. These are rural districts with little or no communication infrastructure to talk about. Infact Isoka is so isolated, with poor road network and no electricity. Internet connectivity is a dream.

OWA chose to work in these areas because of the obvious need and yet it is the most difficult to see results. In addition the ravages of HIV/AIDS are not less visible here, families are still affected, orphans abound and productivity lowered as a result.

Because of the reality of the places, ie lack of infrastructure, no connectivity, electricity, or phones, OWA employs a combination of tools, both old and new, simple technologies, and methodologies that best respond to the challenges on the ground. We believe the

creativity and innovation is not in the newest and most sexy technology but rather in the creative and innovative ways that these communities are using old technology and tools.

In this project OWA used radio, computers, megaphones, mobile phones, videos, cassettes and CDs. Advocacy centres were set up through Constituency Liaison Committees (CLCs) These CLCs are advocacy groups made up of influential people in the communities such as teachers, health personnel, traditional leaders, NGO personnel, religious people etc. committed to the issue.

In addition to providing ICT tools to enhance the advocacy activities of these communities, OWA provides training in Advocacy, Use of ICT tools, resource mobilization and sustainability among other things.

The CLC members conduct surveys in the community on issues of HIV/AIDS, they gather relevant data on the community such as numbers of infected people, health personnel, orphans, stakeholders on the issue etc, they then present these issues to their member of Parliament to address. They also lobby relevant authorities to respond to the issues they identify. The computers are used to manage the databases, to produce community newsletters on the issue, to produce documents for lobbying. They also run mobilize communities to get their views on HIV/AIDS using the megaphones, they record programmes to air on radio stations and also record radio programmes on the issue to educate the communities. The ICT tools are used both to gather information as well as to share information.

For sustainability, the equipment is also used to raise funds.. Computer courses are offered to the community for a fee, megaphones are in demand by government offices and other development agencies that want to run campaigns and mobilize people.

The project has already scored success in that

1. information about these communities is readily available in these centres for anybody that wants to work in this area
2. increased networking, collaboration and coordination between the CLC and other bodies working in HIV/AIDS in the area
3. increased capacity of their elected officials (MPs) who understand their constituencies much better, resulting in better debates in Parliament
4. identification of major HIV/AIDS issues in communities has led to better responses by relevant authorities

In more practical terms, the CLCs have recorded higher numbers going for VCT, support groups for People Living with HIV/AIDS set up and increased health personnel in some centres.

The community members are also much more comfortable using ICTs when they need to and integrate different tools when need to.

OWA is currently looking into ways to bring connectivity to the furthest CLCs which is ISOKA in the reality of no electricity and no network. Mobile telephony is available through Celtel who is one of the partners of OWA in this project.