

MOBILIZING YOUTH IN FIGHTING HIV/AIDS IN AFRICA

HIV/AIDS is affecting Africa's young people and children hardest, yet they will determine the future course of the epidemic, asserted the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) Regional Director Rima Salah at the opening of a pan-African youth forum focusing on HIV/AIDS, held in Dakar (Senegal) from 22-29 March 2004.

The Pan-African Youth Forum on HIV/AIDS: A Matter of Education aimed at mobilizing young, national-level activists in fighting HIV/AIDS across Africa. Participants included some 300 youth representatives from the seven largest youth movements on the continent. Collectively known as the Big 7, these movements are represented in all 51 African countries, and together represent more than 100 million young people worldwide, of whom over 20 million are members in Africa. They include the World Organization of the Scouts Movement, the World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts, the World Alliance of YMCA, World YWCA, the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, International Award Association, and the International Youth Foundation.

According to Forum organizers, the HIV/AIDS pandemic, the worst humankind has experienced, continues to be the most important challenge facing Africa. "AIDS is more than a public health problem; it is a crisis in education, economics, civic, social and security systems. Young people are at the heart of the pandemic, with an estimated 8.5 million young people, ages 15-25 living with AIDS in Africa," organizers stated. "To stem the further rise in infection rates, prevention, care, access to treatment, support and advocacy strategies that are

strategically focused on youth, combined with interventions aimed at the communities in which they live, offer an effective way of mitigating the impact of the disease."

With technical support from experts at UN agencies, Forum participants conceived, developed and established a joint contribution by their organizations to the national AIDS prevention plans in their respective countries. The goal of the Empowering Africa's Young People Initiative is to reduce HIV/AIDS transmission among young people, ages 10-25, over a period of five to fifteen years in selected sub-Saharan African countries. The initiative will work at two levels. It will expand programmes and services for youth, and it will strengthen the capacity of the national affiliates to deliver these scaled up programmes. For youth, interventions will be age-appropriate, and targeted. The multiple needs of the growing numbers of AIDS orphans and child-heads of households will also be addressed by engaging them in ongoing programmes that accommodate their needs, rather than in discrete programmes to minimize the risk of stigma. The overall desired outcome is a decrease in the prevalence rates among young people. Specific measurable outcomes will be established for each country.

Forum participants now face the challenge of raising the funding required to implement their plans. A follow-up Forum to analyze their successes and obstacles is planned in three years' time.

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