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Community Activist Combats Stigma

Training helps the Kongwa community turn the tide against stigma and discrimination.



PHOTO CREDIT: LEAH SAMIKE

Jackson Ngaiti, Secretary of the Kongwa Red Cross Society, describes his efforts to reduce stigma and discrimination

“Our organization’s activities have stimulated community action such as the formation of women’s groups to advocate for the rights of widows and children.”

—Jackson Ngaiti, Secretary,
Kongwa Red Cross Society

KONGWA, TANZANIA | In this remote district of Tanzania, stigma and discrimination continue to hinder HIV prevention and care efforts. HIV-positive individuals who reveal their status risk ostracism from family and community. Often, they internalize stigma, which erodes their self-worth and discourages them from seeking treatment and support.

Local organizations can play an important role in overcoming stigma and discrimination. In Kongwa, Jackson Ngaiti, Secretary of the Kongwa Red Cross Society (KRCS), is demonstrating what a difference one organization—or even one person—can make.

While it had conducted a variety of other HIV activities, until recently KRCS had never tackled stigma and discrimination directly. That changed in 2007, when Ngaiti became the driving force behind a new community mobilization campaign to fight stigma in the Kongwa district.

To date, Ngaiti and the KRCS, with support from Task Order I of the USAID | Health Policy Initiative, have conducted training workshops in 21 villages to raise awareness and stimulate community action to reduce stigma and discrimination. The training covers stigma and discrimination, various kinds of stigma in society, the impact of each type of stigma, education on HIV transmission (which helps combat myths that fuel stigma), and plans for putting together a community stigma-reduction strategy.

Ngaiti attributes his success to training he received from the Health Policy Initiative. Between October and December 2006, the project conducted several training-of-trainers workshops for 153 representatives from community-based organizations and NGOs in the Morogoro and Dodoma regions. One of the participants was Ngaiti. The workshop gave him a new understanding of stigma and discrimination, its impacts, and how to address it, which prompted him to launch the stigma-reduction effort in Kongwa district.

Participating community members have embraced the training, urging KRCS to provide similar sessions in all of the district’s villages. They demonstrated their commitment by contributing their own resources to ensure that the training could take place. Altogether, they donated US\$625—a significant sum given the area’s low income level—to

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“I would like to thank the Health Policy Initiative for its support. If it were not for HPI, we could not be where we are today. But this is just the beginning.”

—Jackson Ngaiti, Secretary,
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support the provision of training. Community leaders even offered to provide future workshop venues for free.

Between April and June 2008, KRCS trained 45 individuals in two advocacy and networking workshops. One targeted community-based organizations, which resulted in the formation of the Kongwa Network for Human Rights Advocacy. The new network will advocate for the rights of HIV-positive people and other vulnerable groups, contribute to community mobilization against stigma and discrimination, and stimulate policy dialogue on HIV-related issues. The network has already prepared an action plan and conducted stigma and discrimination training for 30 councilors, ward executive officers, people living with HIV, and orphans.

There is no question that the efforts of Ngaiti and the KRCS are paying off. In a district where disclosure was virtually unheard of before the training, there are now three PLHIV support groups. Two HIV-positive district residents who were rejected by their families because of their HIV status have been welcomed home. Following a training facilitated by Ngaiti at a local secondary school, HIV-positive children who had been forced to leave school were allowed to return and continue their education. Despite being a small rural district, Kongwa nonetheless had the highest number of people coming forward for voluntary counseling and testing (VCT) during a recent national VCT campaign. In announcing this accomplishment, the District Commissioner gave special recognition to KRCS, saying its efforts were vital for promoting VCT.

While his work has already had an enormous impact, Ngaiti says this is “just the beginning.” With the project’s help, he is trying to establish a fund for orphans, and soon hopes to hold a district-level workshop to develop a stigma reduction strategy for all of Kongwa.

One of the most famous Kiswahili proverbs reads *haba na haba hujaza kibaba*—“drop by drop fills the jug.” In Kongwa, each training KRCS holds is a drop slowly raising the level of understanding and commitment in the community.

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