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## STORIES FROM THE FIELD

# New Voices for Change in Tanzania

**Religious leaders and journalists speak out against HIV-related stigma and discrimination.**



PHOTO CREDIT: HPI/TANZANIA STAFF

*Members and supporters participate in the launch of TANERELA's post-test club*

DAR ES SALAAM | With support from the USAID | Health Policy Initiative, journalists and religious leaders in Tanzania are challenging stigma and discrimination of people living with HIV (PLHIV). The Association of Journalists Against HIV/AIDS (AJAAT), and TANERELA—the Tanzania Religious Leaders Living with HIV/AIDS—have emerged as strong voices in the country's response to the epidemic. Together, these organizations have the power to significantly reduce stigma and discrimination in Tanzania.

### **Religious Leaders Expand Their Network**

Religious leaders have considerable influence on people's attitudes and behaviors in Tanzania. However, due to stigma and discrimination, HIV-positive religious leaders often become social pariahs. Now, with help from TANERELA, they are becoming role models and agents of change.

Formed in 2005, TANERELA is an interfaith network of religious leaders living with or personally affected by HIV. It currently has about 65 members. Early on, the network had limited funding and individual members were scattered throughout the country.

Beginning in December 2006, the Health Policy Initiative provided TANERELA with technical and financial support to strengthen its capacity. Through August 2007, the initiative supported TANERELA in conducting five training workshops focused on strategic planning and resource use, interfaith collaboration, policy dialogue and advocacy, and positive living skills.

As a result, participants launched TANERELA branches in Dodoma and Morogoro, headed by regional sheikhs and bishops. Moreover, in June 2007, the Dodoma branch created a "post-test club" to help encourage and support religious leaders in coming forward for voluntary counseling and testing—recognizing that religious leaders will be better able to counsel others to seek testing if they have done so themselves.

Maklina Jordan, a Catechist from the Roman Catholic Church and TANERELA member, believes that because of the network's expansion more religious leaders will "see the light" and openly disclose their status, a significant step in challenging stigma.

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“Those of us living with HIV are finding society more accepting of us now than ever before. I can confidently say that stigma and discrimination are declining and people’s understanding and knowledge on HIV/AIDS has increased tremendously.”

*Maklina Jordan,  
TANERELA member*

The new regional branches will broaden TANERELA’s reach and strengthen its ability to involve religious leaders at the community level in HIV care and support and challenging stigma and discrimination. Christian and Muslim leaders in other districts have already contacted TANERELA about mobilizing religious leaders in their communities and establishing additional network branches.

## **Journalists’ Association Promotes Accurate Public Discourse**

Founded in 2003, AJAAT’s mission is to contribute to the prevention, care and control of HIV/AIDS in Tanzania by providing innovative communication interventions that facilitate positive behavior change. The association stimulates public dialogue on HIV and AIDS issues, supports the advocacy efforts of other organizations, opposes HIV-related stigma and discrimination, and promotes accurate reporting on HIV and AIDS, serving as a resource for training and information for journalists writing about the epidemic.

With support from the Health Policy Initiative, AJAAT has made great strides over the past two years. In addition to providing training and reference materials for journalists, the association has facilitated linkages between journalists and other key stakeholders, launched forums for public dialogue on HIV-related issues, and actively supported passage of Tanzania’s proposed HIV/AIDS bill.

AJAAT’s Features Service, launched in 2006, allows journalists to compile articles on HIV and AIDS issues to share with media agencies. AJAAT’s website ([www.ajaat.or.tz](http://www.ajaat.or.tz)) has raised awareness of the media’s role in combating HIV and helped the association double its membership. The association recently launched an online forum, *Ongea* (Kiswahili for “talk”), where journalists and members of the public can participate in an online village meeting to discuss the epidemic.

AJAAT played a key role in supporting passage of Tanzania’s proposed HIV/AIDS bill. After receiving training from the Health Policy Initiative on the legislative process and critical issues related to the bill, association members produced numerous stories, features and radio programs. By providing reliable and relevant information, AJAAT increased public understanding of the bill, and supported advocacy organizations’ efforts to lobby for its passage.

Together, TANERELA and AJAAT are mobilizing two of the most influential groups in Tanzanian civil society to become new, powerful voices for change in the fight against HIV and AIDS.