

Education as a Key to Addressing HIV/AIDS and Development Issues

INTRODUCTION: The Work of KAIPPG

My name is Janet Feldman, and I am the founder/director of KAIPPG/International, whose parent organization, KAIPPG (Kenya AIDS Intervention/Prevention Project Group) is located in Mumias, Western Kenya. KAIPPG was founded in 1995 by a small group of students, individuals, and families infected or affected by HIV/AIDS, and quickly grew--mirroring growth of the infection, the needs of those affected, and a recognition that HIV/AIDS was becoming a major national challenge--into an NGO which today serves some 30,000 individuals directly per year and upwards of a million people with our educational and outreach programs. Besides addressing all aspects of the HIV/AIDS challenge (from home-based care to nutrition, and from educational needs to legal and employment supports for AIDS widows), we also address poverty alleviation and better nutrition for whole communities, human-rights and gender/youth concerns, environmental sustainability, general education (ie in addition to education about HIV/AIDS in particular), and accessible healthcare to address a broad range of health needs. We see all of these as intertwined and inter-related, with a corresponding need to address each one with an eye towards integrative solutions, and an understanding that improvements in one area can have a positive effect on all.

Our international wing uses the power of the Internet to raise funds and friends for our programs in Kenya, and we have developed an online roster of volunteers who do everything from research to grant-writing to advertising. We have partnered with Netaid, OneWorld, and Idealist.org--online membership organizations which all address poverty, sustainable development, health and education issues, human-rights and social justice--and do so via information and communications technologies. For KAIPPG, ICTs have been critical to our growth and global outreach, and we are now working on a number of initiatives within Kenya which will incorporate the power of the Internet and radio to help the individuals and communities we serve.

Education is Key:

Education is at heart of what we do: we use it to prevent and ameliorate HIV/AIDS, to address the stigma and discrimination which still attends it in Africa, to give youth a better future and allow for greater self-fulfillment, to give women and men the job-training skills they need to improve their lives and support their families. We also use it to give PLWHAS (people living with HIV/AIDS) and

whole communities the ability to better feed themselves through enhanced nutritional information and supports, and in general to allow for greater individual and community empowerment and input into their health, lives, development, and governance. Our educational programs range from trainings and forums about HIV/AIDS held in schools, community centers, bazaars, and homes, to support and technical assistance given to theater groups and other arts-related efforts to address HIV/AIDS, to fostering health-clubs in schools and writing grants to get more AIDS orphans, girls, and the very poorest children into school.

We are investigating non-traditional educational options for youth and adults who cannot attend school or trainings at the usual times or in the usual venues--especially involving the use of ICTs (radio and the Internet)--and we are in particular focusing on peer education, with both the youth and adult populations (utilizing trainings and various types of media and venues). We are guided by our basic operational philosophy--"helping people to help themselves"--as we think this is the best way of ensuring that the knowledge people receive will be translated into action, and action translated into behavior change and life-quality improvements.

EDUCATIONAL INITIATIVES:

I will outline five educational initiatives which we have undertaken in the past few years, which can certainly be replicated elsewhere while taking into account some culture-specific considerations. These are: 1) general educational access for AIDS orphans, girls, and children in poverty 2) arts as an educational tool for HIV/AIDS prevention 3) nutritional information and improvements for PLWHAS and communities 4) ICT use as an educational tool 5) home-based care and community sensitization.

General Educational Access: We have created a school-based program for children and youth--of mixed ages, orphans, girls, and those in poverty--who might not otherwise get an education, and involve their parents or guardians as well in an orientation and training process so they understand the necessity of education. Health clubs are also an integral part of this program, supervised by adults but with direct input and leadership by youth, especially in peer-education initiatives. We are hoping that youth will engage in face-to-face discussions, use ICTs to access HIV/AIDS information, get involved in artistic activities (from plays to visual arts), and reach out to one another (locally, nationally, globally) and to adults, in essence becoming teachers to their parents, guardians, and the general community. Girls in particular need an education which will enhance their knowledge and ability to protect themselves in sexual situations (and add to their life-quality in general): studies have shown that teaching girls negotiation skills in terms of condom use and general protection is much more effective than teaching them about HIV/AIDS without accompanying empowerment measures.

Arts as an Educational Tool: In Kenya alone there are some 300 theater groups (many youth-led) who use plays and puppetry to convey an educational message about HIV/AIDS. There are also visual artists, dancers, musicians, and filmmakers who are doing the same, and handcraft and arts projects employing orphans and PLWHAS to produce these products for sale, with the proceeds going back into the arts projects and other programs to give them a sustainable livelihood. These programs often involve teaching people how to make the items--thus bolstering knowledge about their own cultural heritage in the process--so there is an educational focus here, too. We are now investigating use of the Internet to market crafts, and of radio to broadcast arts activities and endeavors. The arts are uniquely qualified as an effective educational tool because they can convey a message to those who cannot read or write (or can do so only at an elementary level), and anyone can use their own creativity for prevention and education purposes, hence they are accessible and empowering. One project created by KAIPPG/International is an international arts coalition whose members use the arts to address HIV/AIDS and development issues. Called ActALIVE--Arts for Creative Transformation: Activism, Lifeline, Inspiration, Vision, Education--this program has at its heart an educational message imparted through a variety of artforms and media.

Nutritional Education: KAIPPG has an educational program which stresses the importance of nutrition (for everyone, for PLWHAS, for women and youth)--including the specifics of a good and balanced diet--and training people in all aspects of food production and management, from growing crops to processing and storing foodstuffs. We also emphasize the use of indigenous crops and products, both to enhance sustainability and give people a sense that they are contributing to a healthy environment, as that can be a factor in instilling hope for the future. We have established nutritional field schools which are composed of KAIPPG clients, many older women (AIDS widows in particular) caring for orphans, and they are trained together, encouraged to regard one another as a family, and care for their sick members, giving basic treatment and support to one another. These groups are networked with each other and linked up with healthworkers and other care-providers, and we have also established linkages with government ministries, faith-based organizations, NGOs and CBOs, business and civic groups, foundations, and others, as this not only increases the reach, efficacy of, and support for our programs, but also helps to educate everyone involved about HIV/AIDS and nutrition, and ways in which it can be addressed for the betterment of all concerned.

We have received two grants to enhance these linkages using ICTs: in one, ICTs of various kinds (radio, mobile phones, audio and video recorders, computers) are being used to improve the lives of women farmers (predominantly widows)--including advice on how to market products, pricing, planting and harvesting crops, information about nutrition and getting credit, and to enhance literacy and advocacy skills--while in the other, a coalition of four nonprofits, under the auspices of The Commonwealth of Learning (COL), will be packaging and contributing their own areas of

specialization for the benefit of the group, and hoping to create a model of collaborative sharing via ICTs and use of ODL (open and distance learning). This initiative, called "GRASSUP NOW"--"Grassroots Underpinnings: Poverty, Nutrition, ODL/ICTs, Women"--has education at its centerpiece, and while it does not address HIV/AIDS directly, it will enhance our endeavors and activities in that regard by working to ameliorate poverty and improve nutrition along with the status of women, who play such a pivotal role in the survival and development of their families and communities.

ICTs as an Educational Tool: We now use radio and the Internet as educational tools, not only with regard to HIV/AIDS but also job-training, nutrition information, general education, and as a marketing tool for local products. One of our Kenyan volunteers, an ICT lecturer and distance-learning expert, has developed a proposal which utilizes the Internet to educate and network youth about HIV/AIDS, as studies show that HIV/AIDS education via more traditional methods (in face-to-face discussions, in school) is not reducing the infection rates as much as we would hope. Another project we are working on places this specific HIV/AIDS education within a larger framework of youth issues and challenges, seeking to help youth locally while connecting them globally via ICTs. And radio--which is such a powerful tool throughout Africa--is being used to impart an educational message about HIV/AIDS, in addition to informing our clients on a broad variety of subjects, from small-business operations to general literacy, from community improvement to advocacy skills, and from job-training to financial management.

Home-Based Care and Community Sensitization: These programs are separate but interconnected, in that we try to engage community members in the care and support of those infected and affected with and by HIV/AIDS. Our home-based care program is part of our general outreach program and operates on our inclusive philosophy, namely, that all members of a community should have an awareness about HIV/AIDS, should understand its technicalities and also how to care for people so infected or affected, should engage in efforts to educate themselves and others, and will hopefully take part in providing some level of care and support for PLWHAS, or at least foster a compassionate outlook and a hands-on attitude (literally and in terms of action). Education permeates both the specific home-based care program--where people are trained to care for those with HIV/AIDS--and also the larger community outreach program, as we believe that HIV/AIDS is best treated with compassion and understanding, and that communities and individuals putting such an approach into action will be better able to ameliorate and prevent the disease, thereby repairing themselves in the process.