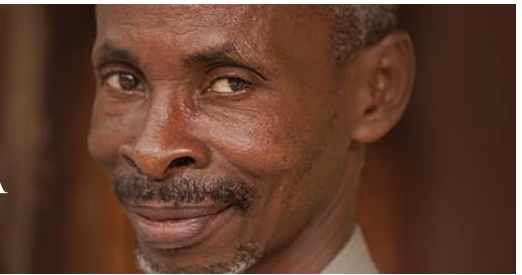




RAPID FUNDING ENVELOPE FOR HIV/AIDS: TANZANIA



MOBILIZING AN ISLAND COMMUNITY IN THE FIGHT AGAINST AIDS



“Before the centre opened, there was nowhere to go, nothing to do,” Asha, a pretty Muslim girl wearing a bright green headscarf, says while sitting on a bench in the Mkoani Community Centre. The Pemba Island Relief Organisation (PIRO) established the centre in the small port city. Within the clean open space of the centre’s main hall, posters on the walls display warnings about drugs and HIV/AIDS. A bookshelf is stocked with books and magazines such as *Femina*, a popular Tanzanian periodical which teams with national celebrities to send out warnings about AIDS. A small room in the back houses two computers.

On the island of Pemba, the second largest of the Zanzibar archipelago, you won’t find many football fields, movie theatres, summer jobs, or even paved roads. The island is primarily rural and agricultural—contributing to its other name, “the green island.” Access to radio, newspapers, and information is extremely limited. Traveling can also be a challenge, the *dala dalas* (converted pickup trucks or vans used for public transportation), run infrequently and have trouble accessing remote areas. The majority of Pemba’s estimated 300,000 people, mostly Muslims, live in poverty.

Chake Chake (population 25,000) is Pemba’s largest urban centre boasting a small airport, an outdoor market, some restaurants, and a few small hotels. Near its centre, down a steep winding road is PIRO’s office. Founded in 1997, PIRO works to reduce poverty through education, economic development, and youth services. “We are run by more than 50 members, nearly all volunteers,” says PIRO’s Executive Director, Alawy Bakar Hamad. “PIRO was formed by members of the community who wanted to assist government efforts in providing social services to the island.” An integral part of PIRO’s mission is in the fight against AIDS through community awareness. While the disease has not yet had a big impact on the island directly, many of the warning signs exist: poverty, unemployment, lack of information, and an attitude that “it’s a mainland problem.” Also, some 20 percent of Pemba men are fishermen, which often brings them to mainland Tanzania and Kenya, where HIV prevalence is high.



Because of the Mkoani Community Centre, local youths now can enjoy a safe environment in which to play and learn. In addition to games, the centre offers computer learning, drug and AIDS awareness programs, a sports field, and reading materials.

In late 2004, PIRO received word from the Zanzibar AIDS Commission of an opportunity to expand their HIV/AIDS services. In partnership with the Mkoani Poverty Eradication Society (MPESO) and the Chake Chake Women Organisation for Development (CHAWODE), PIRO submitted a proposal to a new funding mechanism being offered in Zanzibar: the Rapid Funding Envelope (RFE) for HIV/AIDS. The RFE provides short-term grants to civil society organisations in Tanzania to scale up their HIV/AIDS services that complement the country’s overall HIV/AIDS strategy. PIRO’s project had two key outputs: establishing a youth centre in the underserved port town of Mkoani and training a network of HIV/AIDS educators throughout the island.

“Unemployment is high, especially among the young,” says Mr. Hamad. “There are few after-school programs, and many youths don’t have access to regular schooling. There is nothing for them to do, and we are worried because youth are getting interested in drugs.” In an effort to combat these problems, the coastal town of Mkoani (the second largest port of Zanzibar) donated a crumbling building to

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PIRO for use as a community centre. CHAWODE, PIRO's partner NGO, renovated the building while MPESO hired the centre's staff. The main function of the centre was to give area youths a place to go to learn new skills, to socialize, to be entertained—all in a protected environment. HIV/AIDS education is integrated into all the centre's activities.

Lack of HIV/AIDS awareness was not Pemba's only challenge. Misinformation and stigma were high, and HIV testing had not yet been introduced on any sort of large scale. Outside organisations attempting to shed light on issues were often shunned, mainly due to cultural clashes. PIRO devised a strategy to raise awareness using trusted members of the community as the means of communication. PIRO chose three shehias (administrative regions comprised of multiple villages) from each of Pemba's four districts to be the centres of the network. In each shehia, PIRO explained the project to two administrators (usually local volunteers who assist in local governance) and local religious leaders (imams). PIRO proposed a partnership with these influential community members, asking for help to select two young men, two young women, and two prominent women leaders from each community to become local peer educators in the fight against HIV/AIDS.

Using this partnership, PIRO gained strong support and more than 150 people participated in a full-day workshop to learn facts about HIV/AIDS, devise strategies on how to share this information, and learn how to operate as an HIV community advocacy network. One participant, Mohammad, is a teacher from the village of Kiwani. He now talks to his students about HIV/AIDS during classes. Another youth educator organised a football team which he coaches. Even without proper equipment, a regular place to practice, or even other organised teams to play, dozens of boys show up each week to play with a ball cobbled together from makeshift materials. Before they start playing, Mohammad talks about issues relating to HIV/AIDS. A girl from Chambani regularly offers sewing lessons to girls in the community, where she also shares information on how AIDS is spread from person to person. The imams spend time before Friday prayers warning of the dangers while also sharing facts about the disease—both raising awareness and reducing stigma. "I have learned how dangerous this virus is, this dreaded disease," Rashid Omar Haji, the Imam of Chambani Village says. "Everyone is obligated to share this information, it will save lives."

In the months following the initial workshop, PIRO staff regularly visited each shehia, offering further guidance and instruction to the peer educators. As a result of PIRO's success, community members, young or old, can now turn to a trusted individual for facts—a teenage girl could approach one of the female youth educators, a worried grandmother could see the influential woman, parents concerned about their daughter's



The four youth peer educators from Kiwani village. Each has devised different ways of reaching their community with information, taking advantage of everyday opportunities in their daily lives.

upcoming wedding could approach one of the imams. For each there are multiple options to seek information.

With both the peer educator network and the Mkoani community centre, the project's aim was spreading knowledge and raising awareness. In a place where stigma was high, there is now a centre where an HIV+ man boldly stands up to share his experiences, and is received with applause by the youths at the centre when he talks about the importance of keeping the centre strong. Where testing was once nonexistent, on one day more than 30 youths voluntarily got tested as part of an activity the centre ran.

The peer educators are continuing their mission. In their daily lives, they find time—either on their own or with their new friends—to integrate HIV/AIDS discussions with other activities. As word has spread, people from other shehias and remote villages have come to them for information or to invite them to speak to informal groups back at their villages. Some have asked for training so they can further spread the knowledge. What is clear is where once there was confusion and fear, there is now a community better equipped and committed to keeping itself free of AIDS. Although RFE project funding has ended, the community centre continues to maintain itself through local volunteers. Other areas of the island—seeing the benefit created by the Mkoani centre—have inquired about setting up their own. Asha sums it up nicely: "here we have not only a place to go, but a place to learn. We learn not only ways to protect ourselves, but also to learn how to prepare for our future."

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