



## RAPID FUNDING ENVELOPE FOR HIV/AIDS: TANZANIA



# AN ISLAMIC APPROACH TO FIGHTING HIV/AIDS



“At first, when I would find out a patient had HIV, I would be scared, afraid to touch him. Now, we care for the HIV/AIDS patients as we care for all our patients. We keep them in the same rooms at the hospital, we treat them with dignity. By not showing fear, others also lose their fear.” Zakia is a nurse and Madrasa teacher from Nisai, a town in northern Pemba. Dressed in full hijab—black and white robes covering her from head to foot—she explains how her perceptions of HIV/AIDS have changed. For the past year she has been a member of a network of Madrasa teachers, Imams, and other community leaders on the island who are speaking out on HIV/AIDS issues among the local population, especially to young people. They were brought together in 2004 by the Zanzibar Children’s Fund (ZCF).

The ZCF office overlooks the marketplace in the centre of Chake Chake, the largest town in Pemba with approximately 25,000 inhabitants. The large cement-floored main room is hot, dimly lit by sunlight streaming through the corner windows, ceiling fans spinning quietly above. A half-dozen computers are set up against one wall, a few clients typing away. It is one of only two public places to access the Internet on the island, the second largest of the Zanzibar archipelago off the coast of mainland Tanzania. “Our vision is to see a Zanzibar community free from poverty and disease, a community where opportunities exist,” ZCF’s director, Mohammed Suleiman Khalfan, says in explaining ZCF’s mission.

ZCF’s aim is to reduce poverty through charity, education, development and infrastructure projects. The organisation operates the Aljazeera Orphan Centre in Chake Chake, which cares for 23 orphans, including some orphaned by HIV/AIDS, providing them with food, clothing, housing, school fees, and medical treatment.



ZCF’s “Workshop for Imams and Madrasa Teachers on Fighting HIV/AIDS Stigma and Discrimination. Photo courtesy of ZCF, 2005.

ZCF has also built water purification and sanitation systems for villages throughout Pemba. Every year during Ramadan, ZCF builds on the tradition of festival charity to run a support campaign for orphans and other vulnerable children of Zanzibar. In 2005, they acquired enough money, food, clothing, and medicine to help 500 children.

ZCF, a faith-based organisation, performs all its activities from what it calls the “Islamic perspective.” “Islam is not only rituals in the mosque and daily prayers,” Mohammed explains. “Islam is also about social intervention, charity in the community, and reducing suffering. Anyone who claims he is religious but doesn’t take part in this is a liar.” When the organisation began seeing HIV/AIDS affect the community, especially in the orphan populations, they immediately got involved. In late 2004, staff from ZCF attended a meeting concerning a new funding mechanism for HIV/AIDS being introduced to Zanzibar.

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The Rapid Funding Envelope (RFE) for HIV/AIDS is a partnership between the Tanzania Commission for AIDS, the Zanzibar AIDS Commission, and 10 international donors (see front page). The RFE enables civil society organisations to participate in the national response to AIDS by providing grants to local organisations for short-term projects that contribute to the national strategy in facing the disease. The Leadership, Management and Sustainability Program of Management Sciences for Health provides technical oversight for the RFE, while Deloitte & Touche provides grant management and financial oversight. ZCF applied for and won a grant to use its “Islamic approach” to scale up its fight against HIV/AIDS in Pemba.

ZCF’s 12-month project aimed to reduce stigma and promote awareness of HIV throughout Pemba. “To reach the most people we decided to gather the religious leaders of the communities,” explains Mohammed. ZCF ran a series of two-day HIV/AIDS workshops for Imams and Madrasa teachers from every district of the island, which included basic information, discussions on reducing stigma, and methods of communicating their messages to the community. The workshops integrated Qur’an verses and Islamic traditions with HIV/AIDS advocacy. “For every Imam we got involved to speak to their communities before Friday prayers, up to 900 people will hear that message,” Mohammed explains with an air of satisfaction.

The response from the Imams, Muslim leaders, and teachers to the workshop invitation was strong. “Because of the timing of the programme, we had to hold the workshops at the peak of the rainy season,” one of the staff members who helped organize the events explains, “but everyone recognized the importance of meeting to discuss the AIDS problem. Even during our first meeting when the weather was particularly bad—it rained for three days straight—more than the expected numbers came, people from all over the island.” More than 400 participants attended in all. Through Ijmaa (consensus opinion), all the participants agreed that facing the challenge of HIV/AIDS is both a responsibility of their faith and a duty to their community.



Two of the Madrasa teachers who were trained in ZCF’s workshop. Photo by Michael Paydos, 2005.

As a result of the workshops, the participants formed a network of religious leaders fighting AIDS. They established an HIV/AIDS committee in every shehia (town). The committees represent the mosques, madrasa, and women’s groups from those villages. Madrasa teachers and Imams shared information on HIV/AIDS before classes or prayers. Imams throughout the island agreed to strongly encourage HIV testing for both the bride and groom before performing a marriage. “At first there was some reluctance in the community,” explained an Imam. “They thought that this was not the issue for us to talk about. But, the importance of these messages was heard. Just last month in my shehia three couples who were preparing for marriage got tested. Before, this never would have been possible.” Though the project and funding ended in late 2005, the network has remained committed in continuing its mission without additional support. The ZCF project demonstrates brilliantly how faith-based organisations can use their networks and influence to address the many challenges of AIDS.

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