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Fact Sheet

AIDS education—a battle against ignorance

Many of the 36.1 million people infected with HIV do not know they are carrying the virus. Nor do they know much about the disease. Education could have helped them avoid acquiring the virus. Education is a vital step towards halting the epidemic and overcoming the prejudice and fear faced by people living with HIV/AIDS.

- Preventive education programmes should reach everyone—especially young people, among whom about half of all new HIV infections are occurring. The best educational programmes seek to empower women by providing them with information, skills and services that help them protect themselves.
- If HIV/AIDS preventive education is to be effective, it must occur through all avenues of education (formal and non-formal), through schools and through broader community channels with strong political support. It should also match the various linguistic, social and cultural realities of the groups being addressed.
- Uganda has cut its HIV prevalence rates significantly—from an estimated 14% in the early 1990s to around 8% in 2000—thanks to extensive preventive education campaigns that mobilized leaders at all levels and in all sectors.
- Widespread education efforts, including those mounted by a network of self-help organizations, have enabled Senegal to maintain its HIV prevalence rates below 2%. Massive education campaigns have also helped Brazil and Thailand make strong strides towards managing their epidemics.

Tailoring the message

- Since people have different frames of reference, preventive information cannot be of a one-size-fits-all variety. It has to be customized for different audiences. Surveys and assessment studies that reveal the local dynamics of the epidemic and that identify local attitudes and needs make it possible to tailor prevention messages effectively.
- A condom campaign launched in Ghana in 2000 showed how effectively messages could be adapted to local circumstances. Using street theatre and rap performers, the campaign triggered an 80% rise in condom use in just six months. In South Africa, popular television formats are being successfully used to raise awareness of HIV/AIDS.
- Information campaigns and skill-building are important elements of preventive education. The scope of the epidemic means that such campaigns should involve the public and private sectors, as well as non-governmental organizations, on a scale unparalleled in the history of communication.
- In some parts of the world, AIDS is also striking countries' education systems. In

some countries, up to 30% of teachers are directly affected by the epidemic. Preventive education therefore has to include teachers and others working in education, as well as their families.

- Preventive education must take into account—and help change—engrained cultural habits that leave sections of society (particularly women) more vulnerable to infection and less able to cope with the effects of the disease. Misguided notions of masculinity, for example, often deprive women and girls of control over their bodies.
- All educational programmes must reach girls and women to equip them with the information and skills that can help them protect themselves against HIV/AIDS.
- It is crucial that the protection of human rights serves as the basis for education campaigns to stop the exclusion of people living with HIV/AIDS and give them access to care.