YMCA of Ethiopia

Health Education

Peer educators in the ADVANCE Program discuss issues related to sexual health.

Introduction

The YMCA was established in Ethiopia in 1947. It was once the largest YMCA on the continent with branches in over 20 locations. Unfortunately, the YMCA was shut down for 16 years by the military regime from 1976-1992 and all of its property was confiscated. After the collapse of the communist dictatorship, the YMCA of Ethiopia was re-established by its former leaders. Located in the capital city of Addis Ababa, the National YMCA office provides vision and services for the nine local YMCA branches throughout the country. Today, the YMCA's main program's center on developing HIV prevention, life skills, sports and recreation, gender sensitivity, care for orphans, vocational skills training and employment, and civic education.

Having the distinction of never being colonized, Ethiopia is the oldest independent country in Africa and one of the world's oldest continuous civilizations. Ethiopia's estimated population of 81 million is Africa's second largest and is composed of more than 70 ethnic groups and 80 spoken languages. A Semitic language related to Arabic and Hebrew, Amharic is the official language used in commerce and government. Nearly half of all Ethiopians belong to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, an influential national institution that dates back to the fourth century. Muslims account for 35 percent of the population, while many Ethiopians follow traditional beliefs.

Even though the country is the cradle of mankind and site of many milestones in human civilization, today it is known more for chronic poverty and conflict. Ethiopia ranks 169 out 177 in the United Nation's Human Development Index. Although it is one the world's poorest countries, Ethiopia has made modest progress toward improved economic growth and the national Millennium Development Goals. One of Ethiopia's public health challenges is confronting the spread of HIV/AIDS among young people due to poor access to health services, lack of sexual health information, stigmatization of orphans, and the vulnerability of girls and young women. Sustaining long-term development, however, will depend on its ability to improve the health and education of youth who represent the majority of the population.

Plan and methodology

The YMCA of Ethiopia has responded to the AIDS crisis by partnering with YMCA of the USA and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) Ethiopia Mission. USAID-Ethiopia supports the AIDS, Volunteerism, and Civic Education (ADVANCE) Program which is improving the health knowledge, practices, and care of tens of thousands of youths and families in Ethiopia since 2008. In a context where health topics are difficult to address and where YMCA research has found that young people engage in high-risk behavior, the YMCA of Ethiopia is meeting the challenging and ambitious goal of reaching 50,000 young people and 5,000 orphans and vulnerable children (OVC) in underserved communities of Addis Ababa and Adama.

Keys to success

In order to reach the goals of the ADVANCE program, the YMCA of Ethiopia is using a variety of coordinated activities:

- **Extensive outreach**: This includes education, communication materials, referral services, and the coordinating of public events.
- **Access to youth-friendly health services**: The YMCA of Ethiopia and local partners provide basic information on family planning, diagnoses and treatment of STDs and HIV testing and counseling.
- **Community mobilization**: The YMCA of Ethiopia helps to improve the image of youth, orphans, and vulnerable children through public campaigns that involve youth-parent dialogue and the general public. The YMCA collaborates to mobilize moral and technical support from parents, community leaders, religious leaders, and school administrators.
- **Training**: The YMCA has hired and trained professional program coordinators at each of the program sites. Program coordinators and Peer Educators also receive updated training for their skills set.
- **Resource mobilization**: Through training and outreach, the YMCA of Ethiopia is improving its capacity to strengthen and expand adolescent reproductive health and HIV/AIDS programs.

Achievements to date

The YMCA recruited 500 peer educators who are supported by YMCA staff and volunteers in the target program sites. Peer educators underwent several days of intensive training and were equipped with youth-friendly materials and curricula to carry out their work. The YMCA has worked closely with parents and community leaders to create an enabling environment for youth to discuss culturally sensitive topics related to youth sexuality. The YMCA has also set up referral service systems with local clinics to improve youth access to vital reproductive health, medical, and counseling services.

Future plans

In the second phase of the ADVANCE program, the YMCA will design and put into action the first set of service-learning projects. Service-Learning projects will be developed and implemented by the peer educators who will creatively work with local schools and community-based organizations among others to mobilize educational and psycho-social support for orphans and vulnerable children. At the end of the service-learning projects, the peer educators will evaluate the experience and set in motion the plans for a new and improved engagement with orphans and vulnerable children. Through the ADVANCE program, the YMCA will be able to strengthen the capacity of the local branches to offer more relevant services to the community in a sustainable way.

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