

MOBILIZING ETHIOPIAN *IDIRS*:

Capitalizing on traditional burial societies to serve the living

ABSTRACT

Issues:

Idirs are traditional Ethiopian burial societies that help member's families bury their dead. Catholic Relief Services (CRS) has capitalized on *idirs*, by reaching groups with HIV prevention messages that have transformed *idirs* into community change agents that care for and support orphans and vulnerable children (OVC).

Description:

We Stop AIDS is a participatory tool designed for low-literacy populations, facilitates in-depth discussion around HIV and stimulates action. After completing WSA, 180 *idirs*—comprised of 5400 members--have started health promotion and social and development activities. For example, in one *idir*, members have created five teams for home visiting and by increasing and pooling their monthly financial contribution have provided food, clothing, shelter, and educational and medical support to 29 OVC, 4 PLHIV and 6 elderly. Groups create goals for care of OVC, conduct home visits, and contribute additional fees to support outreach activities.



Photo by Mitiku Telilla/CRS

Lessons Learned:

With an adult literacy rate in Ethiopia of 36%, WSA is ideal for mobilizing *idirs*. WSA stimulates discussion which leads to local problem analysis and solutions. Mobilization of the *Idirs* has been successful because the members have built-in team spirit which is captured by a participatory curriculum. In developing their action plan together, the groups work with a sense of urgency, thus building their trust and efficacy. As traditional grassroots organizations, *idirs* are independently generating their own income--making them sustainable and scalable.

Next steps:

CRS would like to build capacity of successful *idirs* by implementing a monitoring and evaluation mechanism and by training *idirs* in income generating activities. CRS would also like assist *idirs* as they scale up by training them to share their community vision with other *idirs*. CRS plans to train an additional 90 facilitators of WSA who will be able to lead other *idirs* through the participatory curriculum to the creation of a local community action plan.

INTRODUCTION

Idirs are traditional Ethiopian community groups or burial societies dedicated to helping families bury their dead. Most Ethiopian families are involved in *idirs* by making monthly contributions and providing practical help to their members' bereaved family during funeral and mourning periods. Recognizing the prominent position of *idirs* in Ethiopian society, Catholic Relief Services (CRS), with funding from the President Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) has joined with them to send behavior change messages designed to decrease HIV prevalence and mobilize care and support for orphans and vulnerable children (OVC). By contributing their own human and financial resources, *idirs* are helping to dramatically reduce the expense of prevention, palliative care and OVC programs. Though traditionally formed to assist with burials, *idirs* now help prevent disease and serve the living.

BACKGROUND

CRS' Healthy Choices "Avoiding Risk, Affirming Life" program in Ethiopia works with a broad range of faith- and community-based partners that share our commitment to equip youth and young adults with the values, attitudes and skills to abstain from sex prior to marriage, adopt secondary abstinence, and remain faithful in marriage. The program targets youth and young adults, ages 15-49, using activities that provide HIV and AIDS education and appropriate life and relationship skills. The goal of this project is to reduce the HIV prevalence among youth and young adults in Ethiopia.

The "Avoiding Risk, Affirming Life" program uses a participatory methodology called *We Stop AIDS* (WSA) to facilitate in-depth discussion around HIV and AIDS and stimulate community groups and individuals to take action against the epidemic. The curriculum is unique in its simple use of pictures to provoke discussion. The eight sessions present pictures sequentially; participants are then divided into groups to discuss issues about each picture. Topics covered include basic facts about HIV and AIDS, prevention, care and support of People living with HIV (PLHIV), and reduction of stigma. The group thinks through the problems and solutions. Individuals are encouraged to develop an action plan for personal behavior change and groups develop actions plans for their communities.

RESULTS

We Stop AIDS has been used to mobilize 180 *idirs* comprised of 5400 members in five diocese. Results from the *Idirs* include:

- HIV prevention – they are passing prevention message on through various formal and informal forums with individuals and groups.
- Reduction of stigma — through their example of reaching out to PLHIV and OVC, they are addressing discrimination against these groups.
- Local solutions to local problems — they are helping OVC and PLHIV individually and as a group.

In one diocese, the Ethiopian Catholic Church's Social and Development Coordination Office of Soddo-Hossana has reached 36 *idirs* with WSA, and 1080 members have started planning and implementing health, social and development activities. *Ithitimamchoch*, also known as *Sisters Idir*, is one of the groups in Soddo-Hossanna that changed direction from a burial society into one with a new goal "to cooperate and support all members during any health, social and cultural problems or interactions." Care and support activities were planned and implemented on a monthly basis and Sisters divided into five teams for house-to-house visits to HIV/AIDS patients. Sisters have doubled their monthly financial contribution--and by pooling financial

resources--they have been able to provide food, clothing, shelter, and educational and medical support to OVC and people living with HIV.

CARE AND SUPPORT ACTIVITIES OF THE IHITIMAMACHOCH (SISTERS) IDIR

Since August 2007 when the Sisters Idir completed the *We Stop AIDS* curriculum and developed their action plan, the group has documented its care and support activities through 2009 (see table below). The members contribute 10 birr¹ per month as their usual *idir* fee and an additional two birr for care and support activities. There are nine additional volunteers who contribute their time and two birr per month for the care and support activities only.

SUPPORT TYPES	NUMBER OF CLIENTS	CATEGORY	TYPES OF SUPPORT PROVIDED				
			FOOD SUPPORT	CLOTHING SUPPORT	SHELTER SUPPORT	EDUCATIONAL SUPPORT	MEDICAL SUPPORT
Retired	6	non-members	6	6	-	-	6
Patients/HIV/AIDS	4	members	4	4	-	-	4
Orphaned children	25	6 members and 19 non-members	25	25	19	25	25
Children referred to organizations	4	non-members					

LESSONS LEARNED

We Stop AIDS (WSA) has been successful in mobilizing community-based organizations (CBOs), including *idirs*, to expand their vision to include service. With an adult literacy rate of 36%², Ethiopia is an appropriate context for the use of WSA because this tool is effective with illiterate communities and requires few resources. WSA stimulates discussion which leads to local problem analysis and solutions.

Building on existing community assets is an effective way of modeling sustainable community-based programs. Through WSA, CBOs have the ability and the opportunity to solve local socioeconomic challenges. Mobilization of the *Idirs* has been particularly successful because the members have built-in team spirit that is well-suited to a participatory curriculum. In developing their action plan together, the groups work with a sense of urgency, thus building their trust and efficacy.

NEXT STEPS

In a single geographic area, the CRS project can reach 15 – 20 *Idirs*, mobilizing 600 people. CRS would like to scale up this activity by recognizing the accomplishments of successful *idirs* and training leaders and members to share their success with other *idirs*. Through June 2010, CRS plans to train an additional 90 WSA facilitators to lead other *idirs* through the participatory curriculum to the creation of a local community action plan.

CRS has a depth of experience with savings and internal lending methodologies as well as income generation activities. CRS-



Photo by Mitiku Telilla/CRS

¹ 1 birr is approximately \$12.54.

² UNICEF, State of the World's Children, 2009

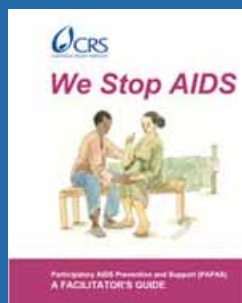
Ethiopia would like to extend this training to the *idirs*, who are involved in care and support activities, to build their capacity to expand services.

As the *idirs* develop their own action plans, there is no mechanism in place for recording the activities they carry out. A successful monitoring and evaluation mechanism needs to be put into place to gather information about group and individual actions taken after completing the WSA curriculum. M&E will strengthen these grassroots activities and position them for external recognition, thereby allowing them to celebrate their joint accomplishments. A monitoring plan will also help the group to observe weaknesses and areas for capacity building.

In addition to scaling up by training new *idirs*, CRS-Ethiopia plans to work with existing *idirs* to build their capacity. This will be done through training in income generating activities, M&E, or by assisting with development of actions plans and sustainability strategies.

WE STOP AIDS

We Stop AIDS (WSA) is a prevention education learning module developed by Catholic Relief Services in East Africa for use with adults. WSA is a participatory learning tool; literacy is not required as it uses drama, role plays and drawings to stimulate discussions around HIV and AIDS. Group size is normally 24 and it takes eight to nine hours to complete all activities. The end goal is to have group and individual action plans to help stop the spread of the epidemic in one's community, to protect oneself and to reach out to others with messages and support. *We Stop AIDS* has reached over 15,000 people in Ethiopia since 2005.



Download *We Stop AIDS* at www.crsprogramquality.org

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