



COMMONWEALTH
HIV/AIDS ACTION GROUP

PERSPECTIVES ON HIV/AIDS
THE HIV/AIDS CRISIS: A COMMONWEALTH RESPONSE

THE SOCIAL SERVICES PERSPECTIVE

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A Social Services Perspective

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As noted by the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting held in Durban, 12 - 15 November 1999, HIV/AIDS threatens to decimate every sector of society in sub-Saharan Africa and to cripple socio-economic development in this and many other parts of the Commonwealth if the spread of the pandemic is not controlled. There are several key factors that social workers will need to take into account in dealing with the epidemic in Commonwealth countries.

What are the HIV/AIDS issues in the social services sector?

The epidemic manifests in very different ways in different parts of the Commonwealth, although it is most rampant in sub-Saharan Africa. Here, in addition to the major underlying factors of poverty, gender inequity, social insecurity and mobility must be added concerns such as limited health care access, particularly for treating sexually transmitted diseases; limited condom use; multiple sexual partnerships; cultural practices that can spread infection; and insufficient awareness and prevention programmes. All these factors have contributed to the magnitude of the problem. Critically, until recently, AIDS has not been a top political issue in the region, nor a core development concern for many agencies outside the health sector. It remained stigmatised and often hidden, even within families, impeding prevention and effective care, let alone long-term mitigation efforts. In the context of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, social workers have been confronted with a vast range of new problems, from the psychosocial effects of infection and transmission of the virus to the generation of large numbers of orphans and requiring care.

In their training and work experience social workers develop the knowledge, skills and values needed to support people as they cope with stresses, changes and crises, including those triggered by illness, marginalisation and discrimination. Many other professions and individuals are involved with psychosocial care and emotional support, including nurses, psychologists, doctors, community activists, volunteers and family members. However social work is a profession known for its commitment to understanding and responding to the needs of vulnerable populations, to helping people gain more control over their lives, and to addressing the political, social and economic issues that affect their lives.

There are three major thrusts to social work involvement with HIV/AIDS – preventive, supportive and lobbying work. Preventive work involves a wide range of interventions in working to improve, for example, the socio-economic circumstances that can drive women to seek commercial sex work that increases their susceptibility to HIV/AIDS, or in developing peer education programmes that can build an awareness among youth of the dangers of unprotected sex. Supportive work may involve counselling and assisting people to develop skills – both emotional and practical – in looking after themselves and their families. Lobbying may involve activities and campaigns to bring about constructive change at political and policy levels in tackling HIV/AIDS.

In what ways is the social services sector addressing these issues?

Social work associations have been formed in many countries around the world and are represented internationally by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), based in Bern, Switzerland. The IFSW has around 70 countries in membership and over 85 professional social work associations representing approximately 470,000 social workers from all parts of the world.

Commonwealth social workers are represented by the Commonwealth Organisation for Social Work, which is affiliated to the International Federation of Social Workers and has a particular mandate to support the work of commonwealth associations of social workers.

There are five global regions of IFSW, which include Africa, Asia/Pacific, Europe, North America, and Latin America & Caribbean. The IFSW has produced two publications that serve as policy guidelines to guide social workers in their practice in the area of HIV/AIDS. There is the monograph "*Beyond Medicine: The Social Work Response to the Growing Challenges of AIDS*," prepared in cooperation with WHO, and IFSW's own internal policy document "*International Policy on Strategies for Responding to HIV/AIDS*." These publications serve as guides to the international social work community.

The primary motivation for social workers extends from the Principles and Standards of Social Work adopted by the IFSW in Colombo in Sri Lanka in July 1994. This stresses the need for social workers to be committed to the principles of social justice and human rights – of direct relevance where there is need to ensure through proactive advocacy that all people affected and infected by HIV/AIDS have proper food housing, education and health care and be able to exercise their rights in this regard without hindrance. The international policy statement of the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) recognises the need to formulate and develop, in conjunction with national associations of social workers, an international social work strategy on HIV, and international policy and guidelines for social workers working in the area of HIV. The statement notes that the IFSW and its member associations undertake to:

- participate in programmes to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS in unaffected groups and regions
- counteract the use of force in the struggle to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS
- give priority to the global implementation of comprehensive anti-discriminatory policies for people affected by HIV/AIDS
- lobby for more equitable and just distribution of resources, services and support structures world-wide
- develop and improve ethical and professional standards of those members involved in this endeavour
- contribute to the systematic exchange of information on all aspects of the issue as it affects social work practice and education, and client groups
- ensure that social workers, and social work institutions and agencies, have the necessary training, education and support to maintain high standards of service to people living with HIV/AIDS
- be involved in research, data collection and information dissemination.

Recent research carried out through the Southern Africa AIDS Information Dissemination Service (SAfAIDS) in collaboration with the IFSW and UNAIDS, indicated that there is significant need in the southern African region at least for updated information on how social workers should deal with the HIV/AIDS epidemic (SAfAIDS, 1999). This need was articulated by social work training institutions, government departments of social welfare, NGOs and other employer organisations, and by social workers themselves. Following this survey, an advocacy document on the role of the social welfare sector in Africa was produced, in particular highlighting the needs of vulnerable children and families in the context of HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS, 2000).

Commonwealth collaborative action within the social service sector

Commonwealth organisations should take collaborative action within the social service sector in the following ways:

- by developing clear operational guidelines on working with HIV/AIDS and identifying the contribution that the social service sector can make. Recently the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) – in partnership with social workers from around the world – were able for the first time to develop a manifesto and plan of action for the profession with regards to HIV/AIDS.
- through transformation of welfare departments/ministries from “welfare” service towards “development” activities is useful in bringing about an attitude change oriented more towards empowering communities. The departments of social welfare should develop strong links with the community, providing inputs such as technical expertise, administrative support and financial assistance.
- Staff in departments of social welfare and NGOs require ongoing in-service training to bring them up-to-date with developments in the field of HIV/AIDS. The support and collaboration of Commonwealth partners should be solicited wherever possible.
- A clearer understanding of the professional role of social workers needs to be developed, in some countries through development of a Social Workers Act, or at least formal registration of social work associations. These associations should be concerned with and act on initiatives to relieve the plight of clients with HIV/AIDS, guided by policy in this area from the International Federation of Social Workers. Different experiences from around the Commonwealth should be shared – for example the Alberta Association has previously assisted the Zimbabwe Association in drafting legislation on social workers’ licensing and registration.

Commonwealth collaborative action across sectors

Commonwealth collaborative action needs to take place across sectors in tackling the HIV/AIDS epidemic. This issue was addressed in July 2000 in Montreal, at the last global conference of the International Federation of Social Workers, at which the Commonwealth Organisation for Social Work was represented. At this meeting an HIV/AIDS Symposium organised by the CASW was held and a manifesto for social

workers working in the field of HIV/AIDS adopted. The manifesto points out that through its global scope AIDS presents different challenges wherever it arises. It advocates for:

- fundamental human rights through lobbying for effective and compassionate social and health policies in each country, and calls for a continuum of care – sexual and psycho-social health education, adequate testing, prophylactic means of prevention, counselling, support, care and treatment
- social workers to enter into respectful professional partnerships with people living with HIV/AIDS, with due regard to basic social work values such as self-determination, dignity and worth of the individual
- different sectors to work together to tackle HIV/AIDS with the social services sector providing a lead role in this. Different government ministries, NGOs, media organisations, trade unions, religious organisations and others all have a role to play
- developing collaborative partnerships and a multisectoral approach to the epidemic.

Social service workers responsible for provision of both governmental and NGO social welfare services within Commonwealth countries can assist each other by building a forum for communication and exchange. An example of this is a current joint programme between Panos – based in London – and SAfAIDS based in Zimbabwe – in developing a programme targeting men's sexual behaviour in fueling the AIDS epidemic. This programme has led to the hosting of national workshops in five sub-Saharan Commonwealth countries – Botswana, South Africa, Swaziland, Zambia and Zimbabwe. The focus has been to help motivate the development of programmes within the southern African region intended to encourage men to adopt forms of sexual behaviour that will protect them and their partners from contracting HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases. This will also be the theme for the 2000 World AIDS Day – “Men make a difference.”

Through activities such as these Commonwealth countries can assist each other in building collaborative partnerships, using experience gained in different parts of the world in tackling HIV/AIDS.

References

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