

Communicate to combat HIV pandemic

Declining condom use makes behaviour change programmes essential to sustain safe sex practices



Analysis

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HAS HIV taken a back seat in the national health agenda? Could health authorities and practitioners be of the impression that the pandemic is under control?

When you look at the recently released statistics shared by UNAids, the disease is still a global concern and should continue to be a regional and national priority. There are 35.3 million people living with HIV and 18.5 million of those people are in eastern and southern Africa. At the end of 2012, 2.3 million new infections were counted and 1.1 million can be attributed to eastern and southern Africa.

Curbing HIV and promoting positive sexual behaviour continues to be a priority at Soul City, Africa's biggest health and development communication organisation. We have used a flagship campaign, among other complementary campaigns, in partnership with indigenous NGOs and other nations in southern Africa, as a primary vehicle to educate South Africans about the prevention of HIV transmission and how to live with the disease.

The OneLove campaign was implemented between 2007 and 2011 and targeted national populations as well as key audiences such as cross border populations and young women aged 15 to 24. Soul City, together with its partners, implemented the programme in South Africa and seven other regional countries namely Namibia, Malawi, Mozambique, Lesotho, Swaziland, Zambia and Zimbabwe. Before the campaign was given the green light, literature reviews, stakeholder consultation and qualitative audience research was conducted in 10 Southern African countries.

When we looked at the results of the campaign, which used radio, print media, television and community based social mobilisation to engage the targeted audiences, we realised there is a significant need to prioritise prevention and treatment of the pandemic by using social and behaviour change communication (SBCC) to mobilise communities and help them take charge of their lives. The campaign was evaluated this year and scored the following momentous results:

- Sixteen million people were reached in the seven countries (excluding South Africa)
- 12 million people recalled the campaign

slogans in these countries

- Radio material proved to be the main medium of exposure across the region (except in Zimbabwe, Mozambique and South Africa)

To strongly demonstrate that SBCC has been working for a couple of years now, in 1995, soon after the first drama series of Soul City was aired on South African television, condom use at first sex was about 15% but had increased to 68% in 2012 – a more than four-fold increase.

This change can be attributed to a combination of communication initiatives, social marketing and the ensuring of a good supply of condoms to enable their easy accessibility.

We can also look at other national HIV related behaviour that has changed and that is also associated with exposure to communication programmes. For example, there has been an increased knowledge of the benefits of medical male circumcision; increasing from 8% in 2009 to 47% in 2012.

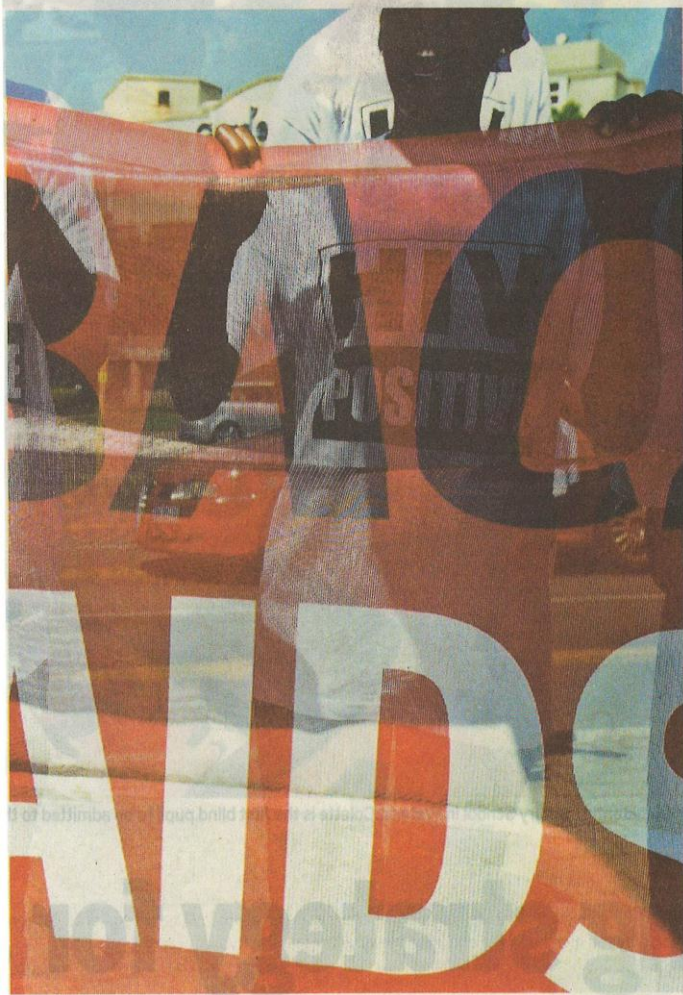


The disease should be a regional and national priority. There are 35.3 million people with HIV and 18.5 million of them are in eastern and southern Africa

With more than 5 million people infected with HIV in the country we cannot afford to be complacent and need to make sure that safer sexual behaviour increases and is sustained, otherwise the epidemic can easily surge again.

While there has been a lot done to fight HIV, we still have an obligation to meet the 2015 targets set by the 2011 UN political declaration that requires us to:

- Halve sexual transmission of the disease
- Halve infections among PWID (people who inject drugs)
- Eliminate new HIV infections among children and halve AIDS-related maternal deaths
- Have 15 million people on HIV treatment
- Halve TB deaths among people with HIV



BE RESPONSIBLE: With more than 5 million people in the country being infected with HIV, people cannot afford to be complacent. Their sexual behaviour should become safer otherwise the epidemic can surge again. PICTURE: GALLO IMAGES

- Close the global resource gap and achieve annual investment of \$22bn-\$24bn (R225bn-R245bn) in the fight against the pandemic
- Eliminate gender inequalities and sexual violence and empower women and girls
- Eliminate stigma and discrimination
- Eliminate travel related restrictions
- Eliminate parallel systems

HIV and Aids related deaths are still a great concern for the world, particularly in Africa. Given recent data from South Africa indicating that condom use is now decreasing, communication programmes need to be upscaled to ensure that safe sexual behaviour is sustained. The Soul City regional programme has demonstrated that for effective SBCC, rigorous research and evaluation, careful design and quality implementation are required.

SBCC has proved to be a great catalyst in addressing the disease and this large scale OneLove evaluation offers evidence for the important role of SBCC and HIV prevention initiatives in southern Africa. As much as SBCC can be implemented in different forms and at a heightened scale, funding remains a serious challenge in developing programmes that will help fight against HIV.

As Soul City commemorates this year's World Aids Day by inviting everyone to a half marathon and 10km road race at the Katsheh Sports Complex in Ekurhuleni on Sunday

KEY POINTS

- » Has HIV taken a back seat in the national health agenda? Could health authorities and practitioners be of the impression that the pandemic is under control?
- » Curbing HIV and promoting positive sexual behaviour continues to be a priority at Soul City, Africa's biggest health and development communication organisation
- » The OneLove campaign was implemented between 2007 and 2011 and targeted national populations as well as key audiences such as cross-border populations and young women aged 15 to 24.
- » When we look at the results of the campaign, which used radio, print, television and community based social mobilisation to engage the targeted audiences, we realised that there is a significant need to prioritise prevention and treatment
- » With more than 5 million people infected with HIV in the country we cannot afford to be complacent

from 7am, we encourage government, donors and funders, health organisations and practitioners as well as communities to significantly invest in fighting the HIV pandemic.

Lebo Ramafoko is CEO of the Soul City Institute and South African ambassador of health NGO PATH's new condom for women