



# Findings

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## Fighting The Insidious Killer

*African Teenagers Battle HIV/AIDS through ICT*

**“T**he most important message is that we must challenge and fight this pandemic relentlessly. We should be as fearless as Chantika Nkhoma who said ‘I have no fear. I live with a killer already.’ Infected or affected, we all have a responsibility to play our part in eradicating this scourge.” These are the words of Ama Ababio, a Zimbabwean teacher and anti-AIDS activist.

According to the Joint United Nations Program on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), African countries carry an HIV/AIDS burden 100 times that of industrialized countries. Tens of millions of adults live with HIV in Sub-Saharan Africa and the prevalence rate of youths (ages 15–24) infected with the disease is alarming. In Zimbabwe, over 25 percent of the adult population harbor HIV, and an estimated 23–25 percent of female youth and 9–13 percent male youth are infected. Botswana has the highest HIV prevalence rate in the world: 35.8 percent of the adults, 32–36 percent of the female youth, and 13–18 percent of the male youth are affected. In virtually any country where 15 percent or more of all adults are currently infected with HIV, at least 35 percent of boys now aged 15 will die of AIDS. According to UNAIDS, the overall HIV prevalence rate among African youth

shows the continuing need for HIV/AIDS educational prevention activities targeted specifically for the young people not yet affected.

### HIV/AIDS and ICT

The use of information and communications technologies (ICT) complements other information education and communications (IEC) campaigns designed to reach youth. The same technology resources—e-mail, CD-ROMs, listserves, and the World Wide Web—that can link HIV/AIDS educators and activists around the world, also hold great promise for reaching youth, who typically embrace the use of technology for entertainment, learning, and communication when given access to these resources.

Several recent reports have provided highlights on the use of ICT to combat HIV/AIDS. In November 2001, a consultant for the International Development Research Council produced a comprehensive report showcasing several pilot project activities in this area. Among other conclusions, the author recommended the importance of teaching girls and young women how to use the Internet (Driscoll, 2001). Other evidence also suggests that women with the mastery of almost any level of ICT

knowledge increase their self-esteem, which affects other activities that work toward poverty alleviation—an important element in decreasing their susceptibility to economic situations that put them at greater risk of catching HIV/AIDS (Coumba, 2001).

### **World Links and the AIDSWEB Project**

As a pilot intervention to explore the impact of using ICT for HIV/AIDS education, the World Links Program, a collaborative partnership between the World Bank Institute's World Links for Development (WorLD) Program and the World Links Organization, has been working with students and teachers in Africa since early 2000 to promote HIV/AIDS education and prevention activities. Early results from the project suggest that technology can play a complementary and useful role in helping combat this horrible pandemic. World Links and the World Bank's AIDS Campaign Team for Africa (ACTAfrica) designed the initial online collaborative project on HIV/AIDS prevention and care. In early

2000, with project support from *Wired* magazine, fifteen schools in Ghana, South Africa, Uganda and Zimbabwe participated in the project using the ICT resources and training available at the World Links' Internet Learning Centers (ILCs) established in schools and community learning centers in each of those four countries.

In 2001, twenty-five schools—with 200 teacher and student participants—were involved in the online exchange with an online project facilitator. In the current project, which will run through May 2002, over thirty schools—with about 300 teacher and student participants—enrolled in the project to exchange questions, answers and discussion via the project's moderated e-mail listserv. This year's project has also been enhanced through a growing international partnership and new country participants. New project partners include iEARN, Schools Online, Education Development Center, and the United Negro College Fund's Specials Projects program. Additionally, schools in five new countries—Botswana, Kenya, the US, and Zambia—have also joined the online project.

### **Project activities**

Once signed up to participate, each student and teacher fills out an online introductory questionnaire, which is also used by the project facilitator—a reproductive health consultant—as a pre-test. Then, participants work through five educational goal activities (each, with the exception of a the cultural exchange module, taking a month to complete). Through the five modules (i.e., *Cultural Exchange*, *Basic Facts of HIV/AIDS*, *The Importance of HIV/AIDS*, *The Challenge of HIV Prevention*, and *Social Action*), teachers and students explore myths and misunderstandings, conduct research, and discuss how they can prevent HIV in their own lives and communities. The *Social Action* component is an important project feature encouraging students and teachers to develop an HIV/AIDS action plan through which the students can try to have an impact on their community. Some social action plans included working with Parent-Teacher Associations, establishing income-generating projects for youth, and inviting testimonies from people living with HIV/AIDS (PWAs). Related to the

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final activity, more than fifty schools (several which not currently part of the AIDSWEB online project) in seven African countries are competing in the first annual *AIDSWEB Social Action Website Design Competition* to capture best practices of school and community HIV/AIDS prevention activities.

An additional project priority is to get more and better HIV/AIDS educational materials into schools. A pilot example of this latter activity has been developed through a partnership with a Zimbabwean NGO, the Training and Research Support Center (TARSC), whose dynamic adolescent reproductive health activity pack, "Auntie Stella," is now available at [www.auntiestella.org](http://www.auntiestella.org) and features thirty question and answer cards, based on the problem page letters to magazines, "Agony Aunts," and radio help lines which teenagers identified as a popular source of information.

### What the participants say

Teachers who have participated in the project report that it has raised awareness of HIV/AIDS issues among their students, enhanced research skills, helped the integration of HIV/AIDS education into school curricula and helped emphasize the role of the teacher as a facilitator.

Strive Mazunga, a student from Zimbabwe, commenting on his participation in the project, said: "This project has really taken me to another stage in my life. I've learnt to help my friends and relatives whenever they are in need." Students of the Namilyango College in Uganda, after participating in the *Challenge of HIV Prevention* online project activity, went out in their community and interviewed various authorities. "We really liked the field visit that we made to various places, finding more about the opinions of

other people on HIV/AIDS, interviewing elders and challenging them, and being asked our opinion on the struggle [against AIDS] by our elders," they said.

### Reaching out to rural youth

Notwithstanding the activities described above, most African youth in the short- and medium-term will not be able to access the vast amounts of information available on the Internet. Most countries in sub-Saharan Africa are still challenged by low Internet and computer penetration per capita. There is about one Internet user for every 200 people in Africa (and this is heavily skewed because of the higher Internet penetration in South Africa), compared to a world average of about one user for every fifteen people, and a North American and European average of about one in every two people.

While this limited access currently poses a significant barrier to youth-targeted ICT-based educational campaigns, such as the AIDSWEB project, ongoing ICT initiatives to bridge the digital divide are also demonstrating how HIV/AIDS resources can be creatively delivered to rural communities. For example, three-quarters of the four hundred or so World Links Program Internet Learning Centers in Africa are located outside of the capital cities and a number have been established as school-based telecenters providing ICT training and access to HIV/AIDS organizations and other community groups in the after-school hours. Additionally, innovative technologies, such as mobile van telecenters and the use of satellite technology for connecting rural schools with high-speed Internet connectivity, are being pilot-tested by the program.

These rural youth are on the front lines in the struggle against HIV/AIDS in their communities. Internet and other ICT resources may play a key role in linking

these future leaders and prompting new youth activism. "Ever since I returned from the AIDS Conference in Durban, SA, things have not been the same for me," said Chris Kwei, a teacher from Ghana. "I really feel like leaving the classroom and joining in the fight against this pandemic disease."

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#### HIV/AIDS Informational Websites

**General Sites:** Avert  
([www.avert.org](http://www.avert.org)) CDC ([www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov))  
US Census Bureau  
([www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov))  
AIDS Network/inxpress  
([www.inxpress.net/~aidsnet/index2.html](http://www.inxpress.net/~aidsnet/index2.html))  
SIECUS ([www.siecus.org](http://www.siecus.org))  
The World Health Organization  
([www.who.int/emc-hiv/index.html](http://www.who.int/emc-hiv/index.html))  
UNAIDS ([www.unaids.org](http://www.unaids.org))

**Youth-Focused Sites:** Advocates for Youth  
([www.advocatesforyouth.org](http://www.advocatesforyouth.org))

**Focus on Young Adults (<http://www.pathfind.org/focus.htm>)**

Auntie Stella  
([www.auntiestella.org](http://www.auntiestella.org))

Peace Corps Life Skills' Manual  
([www.peacecorps.gov/publications/field\\_download.cfm](http://www.peacecorps.gov/publications/field_download.cfm))

My Future My Choice  
([www.edsn.net/na/resources/MFMC.htm](http://www.edsn.net/na/resources/MFMC.htm))

Straight Talk ([www.straight-talk.org.ug](http://www.straight-talk.org.ug))