

LESSONS FOR LIFE: OPEC Fund/UNESCO Project on the Mitigation of the HIV/AIDS Crisis in Asia through Education (2005-2008)

Nearly one in five of the people living with HIV in the world is from the Asia-Pacific region, which is home to two-thirds of the world's population. Roughly one third of the population live below the poverty line on less than \$1 a day.

There are an estimated 7 million people living with the virus in the region that stretches from South-East Asia to the Arab States. And while that figure is relatively small as a percentage of the population, it disguises a very high rate of increase in the prevalence of the infection.

Take Uzbekistan, for example. It might surprise you to learn that the former Soviet Republic has one of the fastest growing AIDS epidemics in the world. The number of new registered cases of HIV infection has been increasing 50% year on year. Although the numbers are relatively small – only 10,000 HIV cases are registered in the country – 70 per cent of these cases are among young people under 29 years of age.

In spite of these statistics, awareness about HIV and AIDS, particularly among young people, is extremely poor throughout the region.

Preventing AIDS through education

A key part of responding to HIV and AIDS is to acknowledge and address the culture of silence, denial, shame and discrimination that surround the epidemic, and thus, negatively impact the effectiveness of prevention. To support efforts to overcome these challenges and strengthen prevention efforts among young people through education, UNESCO and the OPEC Fund came together to support implementation of a programme in nine countries in Asia and three countries in the Arab States region.¹



“Peer prevention activities in school provide life important information to us, which we hesitate to ask from our parents and teachers.”

18-year-old girl in Tashkent, Uzbekistan
(Uzbekistan Peer Training, UNESCO Tashkent)

“As a child and adolescent health specialist, I realize that scaling up HIV and AIDS education in schools is a fundamental measure for AIDS control, which could contribute significantly to the national response to AIDS.”

Education Administrator, China

¹ The countries involved were Cambodia, Viet Nam, Thailand, Bangladesh in Southeast Asia; Afghanistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan in Central Asia; and Syria, Jordan and Lebanon in the Arab States.

The aim of the two and a half-year programme (which ran from May 2005 to February 2008) was to raise awareness about HIV and AIDS through the education system by engaging Ministry of Education officials, integrating HIV and AIDS into education curriculums and training teachers and young people to relay information to pupils in schools across the region. The programme built on UNESCO's experience and leadership in education, and adapted many existing teacher training manuals and advocacy toolkits that had already been developed (see Box 1).

One of the countries involved was Uzbekistan, where – with UNESCO's assistance – a new subject called Healthy Life Style and Family was introduced into the school curriculum for 14 to 16 year olds. Two hundred teachers were given four to five days training. Once back at their own schools, these teachers trained their peers in a cascading system so that they could teach pupils about health issues, including HIV and AIDS. Together, these teachers have the potential to reach out to 2 million young people in schools across the country. The project is already making a huge impact. A survey of school children in pilot schools has shown a quite dramatic increase in awareness about HIV and AIDS as a result of the new subject, which is now due to be rolled out to 12 and 13 year olds too.

Box 1: Other achievements

- The **Advocacy Toolkit** (*HIV/AIDS and Education: A Toolkit for Ministries of Education*) was originally produced by UNESCO Bangkok. It was translated and adapted in nine countries, with over 20,000 paper copies and 10,000 CD-ROMs distributed to key education sector stakeholders.
- Similarly, the **Teacher Training Manual** (*Reducing HIV/AIDS Vulnerability among Students in the School Setting: A Teacher Training Manual*), initially produced by UNESCO Bangkok in 2005. It was translated and adapted in four countries, with over 8,000 paper copies.
- In **Jordan**, an Inter-Ministerial Taskforce was established, with over 100 people attending the joint launch with the Ministries of Health and Education. This meets regularly and will be undertaking a needs assessment of the education sector response to HIV and AIDS.
- In **Bangladesh**, 24 HIV and AIDS workshops were held for a total of 504 Imams (with the potential to reach 300,000 people). 480 sessions were held with 1,440 rural women on 'HIV and AIDS, stigma, discrimination, health and human society' (with the potential to reach 14,400 people).
- In **Viet Nam**, 141 teacher trainers (including curriculum developers) were trained in teacher training colleges on HIV and AIDS prevention education in six clusters across the country.

Reaching out to young people

In neighbouring Kazakhstan, young people from eight schools were trained in a pilot project as peer health educators in partnership with the local non-governmental organisation Equal to Equal. Now these teenagers hold regular sessions with their peers to talk about health issues including HIV and AIDS. The peer educators will continue to do this outreach for the next two or three years – sharing vital health information with their fellow pupils as they progress through school. Initial feedback received shows that this project is already making a significant impact on young people's attitudes towards the disease, and has the potential to reach up to and beyond 3,000 young people.

“Most teenagers thought HIV and AIDS was not their problem,” says Galina Li, UNESCO’s National HIV/AIDS specialist in Kazakhstan. “They have no friends who are sex workers or drug users, so they don’t think it applies to them. But now they know it applies to them too. According to the feedback we received, some of them learned how to say no to unsafe sex. And most of them changed their attitude to this problem. Now they speak to their parents about these issues too.”



**Teacher training in Kazakhstan
(UNESCO Almaty, 2006)**

In Kazakhstan, the joint UNESCO/OPEC Fund programme also encouraged Ministry of Education officials to integrate HIV and AIDS in their national education plans – with potentially wide-reaching repercussions. School children across the country will now be given access to HIV and AIDS education.

“Most children in our country are in school, so we can reach many people this way,” says Ms Li. “It’s very important because young people, when they start sexual relations and try drugs, are in school – so it’s important to address these issues early.”

Intervening early

Experience in other countries – such as Brazil, Senegal and Uganda – has shown that early and sustained action is needed to limit the impact of HIV and AIDS. One of the biggest challenges of the UNESCO/OPEC Fund programme has been to persuade education officials in some Asia-Pacific countries that HIV and AIDS is a problem serious enough to warrant their attention – and to warrant space in an already overcrowded school curriculum.

In China, for example, where an estimated 700,000 people are living with HIV in a population of around 1.3 billion.² Many local education officials and school administrators have low levels of knowledge on the HIV and AIDS situation in their country and the urgency of HIV prevention education (see Box 2). UNAIDS and others have estimated that if prevention efforts are not intensified the epidemic in China could grow significantly.

Box 2: Changing attitudes in China

“The AIDS education I got from the National Academy of Education Administration (NAEA) was very helpful to me. ... it helped me change my attitude, which is a key. Before that I had believed AIDS was far away from us, irrelevant to schools. Now I realize HIV prevention is a responsibility shared by the whole society, and schools have a particularly important role and duty to fulfill. Although students may not be likely to be infected, their life will change, they will [leave school to] work, even go abroad. Preventive education in schools can improve their ability to protect themselves.

In addition, I learnt that innocent people could also get infected, that reminds us of not discriminating people living with AIDS. We should care for them.

After I returned from NAEA, I spoke about HIV and AIDS at meetings, and facilitated the dissemination of national and provincial policies [on AIDS control] jointly with the health sector. HIV and AIDS education is now being gradually expanded in schools.”

Deputy Director of a Prefecture Education Bureau, Shandong Province, China, who participated in AIDS training at the National Academy of Education Administration

² Chinese government and UNTG on AIDS in China Joint Assessment Report 2007.

Over a period of two years, UNESCO worked in partnership with the National Academy for Education Administration to hold a series of one-day training sessions covering HIV and AIDS prevention and school health policy for over a thousand directors of local educational bureaus and top and middle level administrators in higher education institutions.

Zhang Xin, Director of School Health Division at the Ministry of Education said: *“By improving the awareness and understanding of the education administrators in national AIDS-related situation and policy and the importance and urgency of education sector responses, the HIV and AIDS training in the National Academy of Education Administration has played a significant role in pushing the local education authorities to implement the state and Ministry of Education policies and programmes for school AIDS education.”*

Scaling up the response

With the numbers of people infected and affected by HIV and AIDS continuing to increase, and no cure in sight, all areas of prevention take on an increasing importance and the education sector’s potential to protect school-age young people from infection must continue to be tapped. Young people – our future generation – represent our best hope of combating the HIV and AIDS epidemic.

Through the UNESCO/OPEC Fund programme, a new model has been created for HIV and AIDS prevention education that can now be scaled up across the Asia-Pacific region and beyond. By reaching out to education officials, teachers and schools, there is the potential to reach millions of young people with potentially life-changing social consequences.

As one trainee teacher from the Guangxi Teacher Training College said: *“If the contents relating to HIV prevention are added to our curricula, we will be able to learn about it. Once we learn how to prevent, we could educate our students when we become teachers; the students can then educate their parents and peers; thus we will have a multiplied social impact.”*