

RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE ELMINA CONFERENCE ON HIV/AIDS AND EDUCATION: A CALL FOR ACTION

Elmina, Ghana, 19-23 march 2001

“The threat posed by HIV/AIDS to the achievements of EFA goals and to development more broadly, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, present an enormous challenge. The terrifying impact of HIV/AIDS on education demands, supply and quality requires explicit and immediate attention in national policy-making and planning. Programmes to control and reduce the threat of the virus must make maximum use of education’s potential to transmit messages on prevention and to change attitudes and behaviours.”

World Education Forum, The Dakar Framework for Action, para 27, p.14

Senior experts from the ministries of education and from other ministries, such as health, coming from 13 ECOWAS nations, from universities, from social partners in education, non-governmental organisations, from UN system organisations at headquarters, regional and national levels, as well as from most major international cooperation agencies, met in Elmina 19-23 March 2001.

We met to consider how educators are responding to the impact of HIV/AIDS on education in West Africa, where **access and equity, quality and relevance, capacity building and partnerships** and our **ability to provide education services** appropriate to national development are under threat.

We considered the current and potential impact of the disease on all education subsectors – from early childhood to higher education. We are convinced that, in counterattacking AIDS, ministries of education can – and must – work in close partnership with all ministries and in particular the Ministry of health, parents, students, teachers, the media, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), teacher trade unions, faith-based and community-based organisations.

We reviewed evidence in our own countries, communities and learning institutions of the inexorable spread of HIV/AIDS, and the clear indications that our education systems are already under attack throughout West Africa. We believe that we must be proactive now as a matter of utmost urgency, to protect both the lives and wellbeing of our people, our potential for development and the rich cultural heritage of our region.

While West Africa is still relatively less affected than East and Southern Africa, prevalence rates in some countries are creeping up. Increasing mobility of populations and conflict situations will continue to exacerbate the region's already tenuous position regarding HIV/AIDS. Cote d'Ivoire is already among the 15 worst affected countries in the world (prevalence rate: 10.76%), prevalence rate in Burkina Faso is 6.44% and Togo 5.98%. In Nigeria over 5% of adults are infected with the HIV virus or more than 2.7 million people (*Report on the Global HIV/AIDS epidemic for 2000*, UNAIDS).

LEADERSHIP COMMITMENT

We urge ECOWAS education ministers to fulfil the national and international commitments they have already made to prevent the spread of AIDS, and to protect the health of our children and of the education system itself. These include the need, identified in Addis Ababa, for Heads of States and national decision-makers to lead the fight personally. These also include commitments made recently at the Sub-Saharan Conference on Education For All (Johannesburg, December 1999), in the Dakar Framework for Action (World Education Forum, Dakar, April 2000), the Africa Development Forum (Addis Ababa, December 2000), as well as those made in national HIV strategies and international debt-reduction agreements and a host of other agreements made earlier in the past decade.

We recognize that ultimate responsibility for AIDS and education is national, and that our main efforts must be concentrated within countries. At the same time, we believe that **practical possibilities exist for working cooperatively on a regional basis**, in order to move decisively against the epidemic.

In this context, while we recognize that all ECOWAS educational systems must sustain their national education goals and reform efforts, the participants, taking account of international and national strategies, experience elsewhere in Africa and conditions in our own region, **identified the following 3 strategic lines of action for education sectors in ECOWAS countries.**

- (1) ***Preventing and controlling the spread of HIV/AIDS***: especially among young people in and out of school, and among educators.
- (2) ***Reducing the traumatic impact of HIV/AIDS*** on learners, educators and the education system itself.
- (3) ***Improving our management capacity and procedures*** to ensure that effective action can be taken to respond to this crisis.

PREVENTING AND CONTROLLING THE SPREAD OF HIV/AIDS

It must be ensured that:

1. **Life skills curricula** (including HIV/AIDS issues appropriate to each age group) are in place in all learning institutions and that they are made examinable.
2. **Learner-friendly and gender sensitive life skills materials** are developed and distributed, **and are used.**
3. **Young people are full participants** in the response through peer education and other child-to-child or youth-to-youth activities.
4. Teachers, teacher educators, school counsellors, and managers receive **pre-service and in-service education and training** on HIV/AIDS issues.
5. **Information, education and communication (IEC) campaigns** on HIV/AIDS are implemented to reach young people in and out of school.
6. **Youth-friendly health education and counselling services** are available locally which address problems related to HIV/AIDS, STDs and reproductive health.

7. **A range of partners are included in the education system's prevention work (including parents, persons living with HIV/AIDS, religious and traditional leaders, media, local community groups, local and other NGOs, the private sector).**

PROTECTING LEARNERS, EDUCATORS AND EDUCATION QUALITY

It must be ensured that:

8. Care and support programmes for **orphans and vulnerable children** are in place.
9. **HIV support programmes** are in place including:
 - counselling and care for learners affected by HIV/AIDS in all learning institutions
 - counselling and support for educators helping learners to cope with HIV/AIDS.
10. **Innovations in education delivery and outreach** are identified which take account of complex and changing learning needs (including outreach brigades, peer education, youth clubs, and media campaigns).
11. **Workplace policy and guidelines on HIV/AIDS** are in place in all learning institutions and ministry of education offices (including employee benefits for educators affected by AIDS).
12. **Assessment of the impact of HIV/AIDS on the education sector** has been done, and action plans are being implemented to stabilise demand for and supply of education, and protect its quality.

MANAGING THE HIV/AIDS CRISIS IN THE EDUCATION SECTOR

It must be ensured that:

13. At the national level, the Ministry of Education is involved in the UN Theme Group on AIDS.
14. Where absent, a unit in each country with **responsibility for HIV/AIDS (and if necessary, related health issues) and education** is established, staffed at senior levels and provided with adequate resources to drive HIV/AIDS and education strategies, nationally and at decentralized levels.
15. **Substantial resources** for the fight against HIV/AIDS are mobilised, allocated and used effectively.
16. **Information and data** on the pandemic is systematically collected, stored, disseminated and used, within a coherent and comprehensive national and regional **research agenda** for HIV and education.
17. **The capacity of managers and planners** at all levels to understand and cope with HIV-related difficulties of students and teachers is strengthened.

18. **Intersectoral and sectoral management procedures and structures** within the education sectors and implemented in collaboration with the health sector, are flexible, coordinated and able to cope with the demands of the pandemic.
19. **Policies relating to HIV/AIDS and education issues** are reviewed, revised, in place, and rigorously applied (including educator rights and responsibilities, discrimination in learning institutions, sexual harassment, safety and human rights).
20. **Mechanisms are in place for ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the performance** of the education sector in fighting HIV/AIDS, with agreed benchmarks and indicators of progress.

REGIONAL ACTION

We are convinced that practical possibilities exist for working cooperatively within the region.

In the same way that the education sector's response to the epidemic is set within a larger context of each National Strategic Plan on HIV/AIDS, so a country's planning has a regional context. Each ECOWAS nation is affected by the problems and issues of its neighbors, and is linked to them socially, economically and epidemiologically. To respond effectively to HIV/AIDS, every country should take into account its geographic location and recognize the problems and opportunities linked to regional relationships.

The key opportunities include:

- The creation of regional frameworks for cooperation in order to share data, best practices, and other insights into planned responses. These could take the form of agreements, protocols, associations and any other means to assure both cooperation and access to information.
- The establishment or reinforcement of regional assets include institutes (e.g., to research and develop generic resources such as training and educational materials for country adoption), task teams (to provide a combined regional competence and body of knowledge available to all), training (to provide training of trainers) and cost-effectiveness by creating regional economies of scale.
- a lobby for regional and country needs and concerns.
- a regional forum for advocacy
- the expansion of expert networks, including linking institutions of learning to support and supplement country capacity.

At the regional level, the West African Health Organization, which is a part of ECOWAS, should cooperate more closely with UNAIDS and the concerned UN Agencies in HIV/AIDS and education activities.

Finally, the participants expressed thanks to UNESCO for taking the initiative of organizing the Elmina Conference and to donors for supporting this activity. They finally insisted that the organisers ensure that the proper follow-up be given to this important meeting.

SENIOR EXPERTS CONFERENCE ON HIV/AIDS AND EDUCATION IN ECOWAS. ELMINA, GHANA, 19-23 MARCH 2001