



Horizons of Friendship's work on HIV/AIDS in Mesoamerica

FACT: "The HIV/AIDS epidemic in Central America is serious and is worsening."

The highest prevalence of HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus) in Latin America is found among three Central America countries. Honduras has the highest rate with close to 2% of its population infected with the virus and is home to one third of all Central Americans living with HIV. AIDS is the leading cause of death for Honduran women. Guatemala and Belize follow closely with just over 1% of adults infected with HIV. The number of HIV infections is rising throughout Central American countries, particularly in El Salvador, Nicaragua and Panama and the conditions exist for a widespread epidemic. These conditions include early initiation of sexual activity among youth, a machismo culture, stigma against homosexuals, domestic violence and sexual abuse of women and girls.

HIV is spreading amongst the most vulnerable groups and across the wider population. In Central America the virus is transmitted primarily via unprotected sex, with highest rates of infection among men having sex with men, female sex workers, prisoners and among Afro-Caribbean descendants. A marked trend is the growing feminization of the epidemic among heterosexual women, as poverty, violence, inequality and biological factors increase their vulnerability. The male to female ratio of HIV positive has risen sharply to between 3:1 and 1:1.

According to UNAIDS, at the end of 2003 over 1 million children and adults are living with HIV in Central America as follows:

900,000 in Guatemala, 63,000 in Honduras, 16,000 in Panama, 12,000 in Costa Rica, 7,800 in El Salvador, 6,400 in Nicaragua, Belize 3,600 and 160,000 in Mexico.

In 2003, AIDS accounted for 50,400 deaths in Central America and 5,000 in Mexico.

Social and economic factors affect the spread of this epidemic – specifically widespread poverty and gender inequality with much higher rates among women, indigenous and afro-descendant populations. Over half of Central Americans live on less than US\$2 per day. A lack of basic health and education services is widespread and the norm. Migration in search of work to urban areas, neighbouring countries and the USA is also a critical factor driving the spread of HIV. However, the lack of control women have over their lives and decisions regarding sex has the most devastating toll on the sharp increase in HIV/AIDS among women. Cultural and religious conservatism are an obstacle to the promotion of safe sexual practices and the prevention of HIV/AIDS.

Access to basic AIDS treatment is limited in most of Central America, with reliance on international funds (Global Fund) to provide anti-retroviral drugs. The signing of a free-trade agreement between Central American countries and the US could impede the widespread distribution of generic AIDS drugs. Costa Rica offers universal access while poorer Central American countries have extremely limited public health budgets.

References

UNAIDS - Latin America: www.unaids.org

HIVInSite - Latin America: <http://hivinsite.ucsf.edu>

AVERT.ORG – HIV & AIDS in Latin America and the Caribbean www.avert.org/aidslatinamerica.htm

Horizons of Friendship is working with partner organizations to coordinate efforts to combat HIV/AIDS

Horizons of Friendship – committed to social change in Mesoamerica

Horizons of Friendship is a Canadian non-profit, international development organization, committed since 1973 to eliminating the root causes of poverty and injustice in Mesoamerica. Horizons works with 22 partners in 38 projects in Chiapas, Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama. This work furthers sustainable development in a framework of peace, democracy and equity. Our program focuses on alternative rural development, promotion of rights and citizen participation and health, education and community action that enables marginalized people to build decent lives and achieve social transformation. In Canada, Horizons is actively engaged in community outreach work to raise awareness on global issues and works with Canadian organizations at the local and national levels to bring about social justice.

Horizons of Friendship's Learning Network – working together for change

Horizons of Friendship works with partner organizations in a horizontal learning relationship that strengthens the capacity of these organizations to work with the local populations towards social change. Organizations are involved in sharing ideas, experiences and information via regional meetings, thematic workshops on gender equity and project exchanges.

HIV/AIDS identified as priority theme for Horizons' regional work

At Horizons' 2004 regional meetings our partners expressed concern of the growing epidemic of HIV/AIDS in Mesoamerica and the urgent need of civil society organizations to become involved in its prevention and treatment. They emphasized how poverty, social, gender and racial inequality exasperate the vulnerability to the spread of HIV/AIDS. At this meeting Horizons identified work in HIV/AIDS as a priority area for regional collaboration.

First Step: Mesoamerican Encounter on HIV/AIDS

Since this is a new area of work, our first step was to come together to learn about the impact of HIV/AIDS and to discuss as a Learning Network how we can better coordinate efforts in the region. To this end Horizons organized a three-day workshop in **November 2005** with the participation of 32 representatives from 18 organizations involved in combating HIV/AIDS.

The goal of this meeting was to facilitate an exchange of information, knowledge and experiences at the Mesoamerican level, on approaches towards HIV/AIDS between non-governmental organizations in order to build joint learning and action efforts, within Horizons of Friendship's Learning Network.

Our specific objectives for the meeting were to:

- Recognize the magnitude and state of HIV/AIDS in the region;
- Characterize the existent methods and approaches of non-governmental organizations, as related to awareness raising, prevention, treatment and advocacy towards HIV/AIDS;
- Identify ideas for learning and coordination of efforts to an integrated approach to combating HIV/AIDS in the region.

Meeting Components

- Five keynote presentations on HIV/AIDS in Mesoamerica;
- 12 presentations on national situations and experiences of NGOs involved with youth, women, rural, homosexual and HIV positive populations in prevention, education, treatment and advocacy work;
- Group work on the role of Mesoamerican NGOs in combating HIV/AIDS;
- Group work to identify future coordination.

Future Directions: strengthening citizen participation in advocacy

Horizons will pursue a regional process for continued learning and exchange among NGOs with a specific focus on strengthening capacity in citizen participation and advocacy. To stop the spread of HIV/AIDS in Mesoamerica all sectors of society must be involved and governments must commit policies and budgets in mass education and prevention campaigns and in universal access to HIV/AIDS medication. Citizens groups must take a leadership role in recommending public policy on HIV/AIDS at the local, national and regional level. Non-governmental organizations can offer models for an integrated and people-focused approach to combating HIV/AIDS, and can help citizens groups increase their political participation.

Horizons is designing a long-term process involving workshops, exchanges and production of material to strengthen capacity in citizen participation and advocacy on HIV/AIDS. The first phase of this process will be implemented in 2006 – a workshop on citizen participation and advocacy and the development of a coordinated action plan within Horizons' Learning Network in Mesoamerica.

Horizons of Friendship Support for Partner Programs related to HIV/AIDS

Horizons also supports specific partner work in prevention and treatment:

○ Humanitas Association

Humanitas Association of **San José, Costa Rica** is dedicated to improving the quality of life for people living with HIV/AIDS and to diminish further spreading of the pandemic in Costa Rica. Since 1994, it has operated a shelter named *Place of Hope* for people living with AIDS and provides a variety of outreach services to people affected by HIV/AIDS and drug dependency, particularly those in conditions of extreme poverty. Humanitas Association offers an integrated approach to treatment focusing on harm reduction. Its professional staff and volunteers also conduct HIV/AIDS prevention and awareness raising campaigns, particularly among youth, women and people with drug dependency.

○ Education on Reproductive Health –focus on women & youth

Several organizations with Horizons' Learning Network implement prevention activities with a focus on women and youth. These activities include:

- El Salvador: (ASPS & FUNSALPRODESE) - HIV/AIDS prevention to raise awareness on safe sex practices and HIV/AIDS among youth, via talks at schools, radio programs, training youth facilitators, workshops for parents, teachers and gang members);
- Nicaragua: (CCOAR, ADP, Coop Masaya) - Radio program for youth, community health promoters, talks with women and youth;
- Honduras: (CEM-H): Education among young women, public campaigns;
- Costa Rica: (APC): Education among AfroCostaRican population;
- Chiapas, Mexico (COFEMO) Education among indigenous women;
- Other organizations will be integrating HIV/AIDS prevention into their community action program in 2006.

HELP SUPPORT HORIZONS OF FRIENDSHIP'S WORK TO COMBAT HIV/AIDS IN MESOAMERICA

BE PART OF THE CHANGE!



El Salvador – Elementary students learning about HIV/AIDS



Nicaragua: community promoters with material on reproductive health



El Salvador - presentation on safe sex to gang members



Costa Rica: Place of Hope Shelter –living in dignity with HIV/AIDS

Please make a tax-creditable contribution to Horizons of Friendship to support our work in combating HIV/AIDS in Mesoamerica

☞ By credit card, online at: www.horizons.ca through CanadaHelps, with Visa or MasterCard or by phone at 905-372-5483 ext 10,

☞ By cheque to Horizons of Friendship, 50 Covert St. Box 402, Cobourg, Ontario K9A 4L1

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