This newsletter is dedicated to Trevor Chirimambowa who died on 30 April 2020. Those who were touched by him understand that the quality of existence is more important than the length of one’s life. He was a pillar of strength, support and discipline. I owe my success and my life in general to him. His motivational talks and inspirational words continued to change. I’m spending more time indoors with my family and this has strengthened our support. We provide daily updates on COVID-19 and give us ideas to facilitate e-support groups.

On a normal working day, Community Adolescent Treatment Supporters (CATS) are out and about, offering care and support as a link between their clients and health facilities. That’s all changed with virtual service provision. And young people living with HIV have noticed the CATS’ absence. They looked forward to their clinic appointments where a peer would provide support and show interest in their lives. We asked some CATS in Bulawayo and Masvingo, Zimbabwe what they think about the change.

How can you still provide support and care without visiting your clients at home?

Africaid is helping us make sure we do as we can by giving us airtime to follow up on our clients. They provide daily updates on COVID-19 and give us topics and new ideas on how to facilitate e-support groups.

What makes it difficult for you to support your clients?

Providing care and support over the phone means I can’t see their emotional reactions when we have counselling sessions. I can’t quickly identify cases of abuse. I am unable to observe if they are doing well. I have to rely on their word.

What are the biggest challenges facing your clients?

Though the government is encouraging people to go to their nearest facility, clients on second-line [ART] are being turned away from local clinics since they don’t have second-line medicine. This means they have to visit big city hospitals and go through security checkpoints.

Are you getting enough support?

I’m spending more time indoors with my family and this has strengthened their support in making sure I am adherent. It’s easy for them to notice changes in my emotions.

CATS chat

On the way, the police asked me where I was going and I said the hospital. They wanted proof but I said my condition was confidential. They then told me to get off the bus and go home if I couldn’t prove I was going to the clinic. I had to tell them I was collecting my ART. Still they insisted on proof. All I had was my ART booklet, and I ended up having to show it in front of all the other passengers. I felt upset because my rights to privacy, dignity and respect were violated. I know I’m not the first person to go through this.

As an activist, I’ve learnt that to bring about change you need to stand up for what you believe in and be wise and mature too. That day, I could have been loud and aggressive, yet I decided to be cool, calm and collected – focused on getting the police officers to realise that making people show proof that they’re going to hospital violates their human rights.

Disclosure is a choice. Even if we’re openly living with HIV that doesn’t mean we want to be reminded of it every single day. The response to COVID-19 should be rights-based, otherwise people won’t go for treatment out of fear of being victimised.

For some time, we’ve been actively engaged in advocacy with high-ranking police officers to change the situation on the ground. And just recently, we’ve seen an improvement through this.

One day in April, I caught the bus to go for my routine refill of medication. On the way, the police asked me where I was going and I said the hospital. They wanted proof but I said my condition was confidential. They then told me to get off the bus and go home if I couldn’t prove I was going to the clinic. I had to tell them I was collecting my ART. Still they insisted on proof. All I had was my ART booklet, and I ended up having to show it in front of all the other passengers. I felt upset because my rights to privacy, dignity and respect were violated. I know I’m not the first person to go through this.
Unlocking access to health services under lockdown

BY SYLVIE TEBENGUE NNYOMBI COMMUNICATIONS MANAGER, UGANDA NETWORK OF YOUNG PEOPLE LIVING WITH HIV (UNYPA)

In Uganda, lockdown has brought to light something we’ve always known about young people: their energy and willingness to help. When it became difficult to visit health centres to get our medication, our young ambassadors found a solution, unlocking access to health services.

You have to understand what lockdown means for many young people living with HIV. For some, school is a refuge from the gender-based violence (GBV) they experience at home. Others enjoy school because they haven’t yet found the courage to disclose their status to their parents. And for others, lockdown means having to sneak out to access medication and counselling services.

Our young ambassadors, some on bikes and others on foot, set out to resolve these issues. They combed their communities, practising and promoting proper handwashing, delivering ART and condoms, offering counselling and personal hygiene tips, and increasing awareness of GBV. Originally, they planned to deliver just ART but they’ve expanded their services beyond HIV.

This isn’t without its challenges. For example, if you deliver medication to an adolescent girl and her father demands to know why you’re there, what do you do? That’s what happened to Peter Mweru in Mbalance District — here’s his blog. And how do you shield peers from stigma when their friends realise you’re delivering treatment but weren’t aware of their friend’s status?

We are calling on Uganda’s national COVID-19 task force to include our young ambassadors in their plans because they clearly are a wonderful resource. For a long time, we’ve said young people want to be useful — to make a difference — and this shows.

Other news

Y+ Global READY for action with the HER Voice Fund

BY MAXIMINA JOKONYA, HER VOICE FUND COORDINATOR, Y+ GLOBAL

All of us at Y+ Global are delighted to announce that this year we will manage the HER Voice Fund — a Global Fund initiative supported by ViiV Healthcare Positive Action to ensure adolescent girls and young women have a say in decisions that affect their health. We were chosen because of our:

- Significant experience working for and with young people living with and affected by HIV.
- Strong youth-led and youth-owned networks in all 13 priority HER Voice Fund countries, including the READY+ countries Eswatini, Mozambique, Tanzania and Zimbabwe.
- Proven track record in advocating for policies and programmes that are relevant to the health and wellbeing of young people — such as READY to Lead and leading movements like READY — and ensuring that young people’s voices are represented and heard.

“Nobody will tell our stories better than us or feel our pain better than we do,” said Brenda Formin, HER Voice Fund Ambassador. “For once, we were witnessing an organisation that still walks the path of young people owning the HER Voice Fund space. This doesn’t only bring creativity, diversity and efficiency but also exceptional professionalism.”

The HER Voice Fund supports the meaningful engagement and leadership of adolescent girls and young women in Global Fund and related national processes. Networks or community-based organisations must be based in one of the 13 eligible countries and work with and for adolescent girls and young women in one or two of these areas: gathering information and stories, policy and advocacy, training and mentoring for advocacy, and monitoring and accountability. More information can be found here.

Resources: READY for COVID-19

Covid-19 is a new virus and we still have much to learn. Trustworthy information can be hard to come by, and young people living with and affected by HIV have burning questions that need answering. Unfortunately, we’re seeing just how easy it is for misinformation to spread in many of our communities. This not only jeopardises people’s ability to stay safe but can also heighten anxiety and stigma in an already challenging time.

READY partners have produced these resources, many in different languages, to demystify COVID-19 and offer clear, positive advice for young people, caregivers, healthcare providers and implementing partners:

- READY’s practical guides on keeping young people healthy (WhatsApp versions also available!).
- Africaid’s colourful videos encouraging young people to adhere to their ART while looking after themselves and each other.
- PATAs Action Plan reinstating their commitment to supporting frontline health workers.
- Q+A by Y+ Global and UNICEF Eastern and Southern Africa for adolescents and young people living with HIV.
- REJUSIDA’s psychosocial support presentations covering topics ranging from positive masculinity to social connectedness.
- Newsletters by GNP+, ICW and Y+ Global on positive living in the time of COVID-19.

Many national, regional and international meetings have been cancelled or postponed due to COVID-19, and many are now virtual.

June

16 June International Day of the African Child
23–25 June UNAIDS Programme Coordinating Board
26 June Support. Don’t Punish: Global Day of Action
July to October

HV2020 Online
6–10 July AIDS 2020: Virtual
11 July World Population Day

Support the READY movement by following these events and posting to:

Y+ Global and Frontline AIDS would like to thank our current READY partners: Africaid, AIDS and Rights Alliance for Southern Africa (ARASA), Aidsfonds, Alliance Burundaise contre le SIDA (ABIS), Alliance Côte d’Ivoire (ANIS-C), ATHENA, Community Organisation of Youth Against HIV Uganda (COYAU), Coordinating Assembly of Non-Governmental Organisations (CANGO), Education as a Vaccine (EVAL), ENY+, GNP+, iDealab, India HIV/AIDS Alliance, Marie Stopes International Uganda, M&C Saatchi World Services, Network of Young People Living with HIV and AIDS in Tanzania (NYP+), Nkwazia Initiative for Adult Education and Development (NIAP), Organisation of Social Services, Health and Development (OSSHD), Paediatric Adolescent Treatment Africa (PATA), Peer to Peer Uganda (PEERU), Positive Vibes, Regional Psychosocial Support Initiative (REPSIS), REJUSIDA Mozambique, Réseau des Jeunes Vivant Avec le VIH au Burundi (RNJ+), Stop AIDS Alliance, UNYPA, Young Africa, Youth LEAD, Youth RISE, Youth4HIVC Movement and Zimbabwe Young Positives (ZY+).

We would like to thank the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, Comic Relief and the MAC AIDS Fund for their support.