



ADVOCACY DURING COVID-19

Finding solutions that work for you.

COVID-19 may have forced us all to change how we work but it has not stopped us. Below are just some examples of how Frontline AIDS partners have continued to have an impact during the pandemic. RedTraSex in Latin America and Institute for Human Development in Bolivia have embraced new technologies to communicate their advocacy messages, whereas Frontline AIDS in the UK and YouthRISE in Nigeria have found new allies and adapted to changing circumstances. In the face of both physical and political restrictions during COVID-19, the examples below show that advocacy can still be effective if we adapt the way we make our voices heard.

EMPOWERING SEX WORKERS IN LATIN AMERICA

COVID-19 has not stopped the array of actions led by RedTraSex in Latin America – quite the opposite. They have a history of adapting to difficult circumstances. The economic crash in Argentina in 2001 brought services to a complete stop impacting on sex workers in the country. When COVID-19 arrived RedTraSex drew on this past experience, adapted their ways of working and planned for the long term.

Their first step was to get approval from one of their donors to redirect funds that had been earmarked for international travel for advocacy. They also applied to Frontline AIDS for additional support.

With this money they provided food packages to sex workers. Then they began capacity building, employing new advocacy officers, one for each country in their network. With support from volunteers, each officer is responsible for strengthening the capacity of local sex workers and supporting them to advocate for their rights.

Many sex workers did not have smartphones or enough money to use them, so RedTraSex paid for their data bundles or gave them a phone on the condition that they attended a training session. In small workshops of between 5 and 10 women, the advocacy officers shared the latest guidance on COVID-19 and advice on how to minimise the risks of continuing to work. They also taught the women how to use smartphones, digital technologies and online platforms (like Zoom) and gave specific advocacy training. RedTraSex Director, Elena Reynaga, believes that for them, “the pandemic has more positives than negatives especially in the use of new technologies”.

Each year the Organisation of American States (OAS) holds an annual meeting and RedTraSex attends to lobby decision makers. Normally they are restricted by travel costs but as the conference was held virtually this year any number of people could take part. Using their newly developed skills, they advocated virtually and RedTraSex had its biggest ever presence. Despite all their efforts, no country in Latin America has recognised sex work as work so RedTraSex is committed to continue strengthening sex worker organisations in the region to enable them to defend their rights.

COVID-19 created another opportunity for capacity building. A researcher in Canada approached RedTraSex to hear how COVID-19 was impacting on sex workers. Elena arranged for a group of women to be employed to carry out some research. They each contacted 20 people via WhatsApp, interviewed them and the data gathered was sent to researchers in Canada. Elena oversaw the process, training the women throughout, correcting their work and making sure they learnt from the process.

For many of the sex workers it has been hard to adjust to different ways of working and new technology, especially some of the older women who have never used smartphones before. But throughout the year, RedTraSex has provided more and more women with the hardware they need and the skills to use it. Now they find that technology has empowered them. New technologies have been used in every aspect of their work, to advocate with governments and UNAIDS, to look for funding sources and to build the capacity of sex worker organisations.

FINDING ALLIES IN DIFFICULT TIMES

In July 2020, the UK government announced it would be cutting its budget for overseas aid, soon after it merged the Department for International Development (DFID) and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office – a move many fear will shift the focus of aid spending away from health. Frontline AIDS was especially concerned about a DFID-funded programme which provides HIV and SRHR services to under-served populations - Approaches in Complex and Challenging Environments for Sustainable SRHR (ACCESS). It was awaiting a decision by the UK government on its future and Frontline AIDS staff were keen to find potential allies within the newly merged Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO). Baroness Sugg, a senior FCDO Minister at that time, had recently become a SheDecides Champion – part of a global movement, pushing for the rights of women and girls to be protected. As a SheDecides champion herself, Frontline AIDS's Executive Director, Christine Stegling approached Baroness Sugg and suggested a meeting to discuss their shared goals. In ordinary times, this would have happened face to face, but due to COVID-19 a video call was arranged instead. The call gave the two women an opportunity to discuss not only SheDecides, but also the importance of protecting UK funding for AIDS and SRHR, particularly for programmes like ACCESS that serve the most marginalised people. The following month the UK government confirmed that it would continue funding the ACCESS programme.

Since this meeting further cuts to UK aid were announced and in response, Baroness Sugg resigned from her post. Despite growing concerns about the UK government's approach, Frontline AIDS remains determined to keep HIV on the agenda and to call for aid money to be directed towards the most marginalised people. Rather than seeing COVID-19 as a reason for cutting back

on spending in other areas, Frontline AIDS is arguing passionately that interventions that support the most marginalised members of our society are needed now more than ever.

PARTNERSHIPS FOR CHANGE IN NIGERIA

YouthRISE Nigeria advocates for the right to health for young people. They have a history of campaigning for drug law reform and promoting harm reduction but only recently expanded their work to include people in prisons.

Nigerian prisons are over-crowded, and hold many people awaiting trial. When COVID-19 began to spread, the government launched a prison decongestion programme, mainly focused on granting early release to the elderly and people with only a few months left to serve of their prison term. YouthRISE Nigeria wanted young people to be included in their initiative so they reached out to organisations with experience working with the prison population, including Hope Behind Bars, and together advocated for the release of young people and low-level drug offenders. The Open Society Foundation and Frontline AIDS provided financial support.

With their partners, YouthRISE Nigeria used the media to raise awareness of the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on vulnerable populations, including people who use drugs, people living with HIV and people in prisons. They demanded that government includes these marginalised communities in its COVID-19 response,

At the same time, they built relations with prison officials and others in the criminal justice sector. As prisons are underfunded and rely on support from NGOs, YouthRISE Nigeria provided PPE, medication and hygiene kits for use in the prisons, particularly focussing on the needs of female inmates. As a result, a relationship of trust and respect developed with the prison authorities.

Through their advocacy with other civil society partners, YouthRISE Nigeria secured the release of 71 young prisoners, including women incarcerated for drug-related offences.

This was an emergency intervention, which required YouthRISE Nigeria to adapt and learn as they went along. Now they are keen to do more strategic planned work on criminal justice reform. They hope to continue working directly with prisons and to strengthen their advocacy for drug policy reform and a justice system that promotes alternatives to incarceration.

DIVERSIFYING COMMUNICATION IN BOLIVIA

One aspect of the work of the Institute for Human Development (IDH) in Bolivia is providing information and raising awareness of health-related issues. They embrace all forms of communication from telephones through to social media and internet platforms and have a dedicated communications officer who leads this work. During the COVID-19 pandemic they diversified their communication channels even further to broaden their reach and continue to deliver public health messages to their target audiences.

They usually hold workshops and training sessions for students and teachers in the country's universities. They continued this during COVID-19, using a range of channels from WhatsApp to Google Meet, but they found that many of the students and teachers had problems connecting to the internet. So IDH provided them with credit or data to enable them to get online.

They also found that people in the wider community were finding it difficult to access up to date information during the COVID-19 pandemic. So, they lobbied local governments calling for the creation of public places where people could access information online for free. These hubs are not only invaluable for people that IDH traditionally work with (young people and the LGBT community) but also for the community at large.

Throughout COVID-19, IDH has used every form of social media imaginable to continue to empower and inform the communities they work with and to raise their concerns with national government: from a competition for people to create their own TikTok videos championing diversity or defending human rights to a Facebook Live Gay Pride event and a virtual march under the banner "Separades por la pandemia, Unidos por unestros derechos" (separated for the pandemic, united for our rights).

ADVOCACY TIPS



- **Stay focused.** Continue to advocate for your priorities. Keep your community at the heart of what you do ensure that they are informed and have all the support they need to be involved.
- **Remain flexible.** You may need to find new ways of working and events in your country may lead you to move in new directions.
- **Embrace technology.** Whether its WhatsApp, Zoom or Facebook Live there are a whole host of ways that you can communicate to mobilise communities and directly influence decision makers. You may need to invest in training or equipment to support you.
- **Form new partnerships.** Continue to work with other stakeholders. Changing priorities may make it necessary to find new allies with experience in different areas.
- **Do your research.** Find out who the people are with influence, follow political developments and look out for advocacy opportunities.