

The PACANet Chronicles

A quarterly newsletter of the Pan African Christian AIDS Network

www.pacanet.net

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Introduction

Welcome to the PACANet Chronicles for the 1st quarter, 2014. In this volume, we talk about the CCANet review meeting held in Burundi towards the end of 2013, PACANet entrance to the Democratic Republic of Congo-DRC and the general assembly at which a new board was elected to stir the process in Madagascar, a Country where the HIV prevalence is still very low at 0.37% yet the Church is motivated and determined to take action mainly in the area of prevention. The events were made possible in partnership with DMCDD, and it is with sincere gratitude that we appreciate their invaluable continued support.

"CCANet Coordinators review meeting held in Burundi. Lessons from the field experience!"

The annual review meeting was held during the first week of December, 2013 at Kings Conference Centre in Bujumbura, Burundi. The meeting drew CCANet coordinators from the 8 countries including Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Liberia, Madagascar, Sierra Leone, Swaziland, South Sudan and Uganda. The team at the meeting was able to assess, reflect, share, process and planned for the way-forward. This time round, the project consultant from DMCDD Ms Karen Sorensen joined the group and also facilitated a session on advocacy. Towards the end of the 5 day's meeting, the Executive Secretary presented PACANet's strategic direction beyond 2013. In the spirit of a shared vision and as host of the meeting, Dutabarane the Christian network in Burundi was represented by three of her staff led by Ms. Nyandwi Nicimpaye Cesalie the director who also shared their model and the contextual experience of networking the church congregations in response to HIV and AIDS, and poverty.

The model has been effectively working with 28 Church denominations, which are mobilized, organized, trained in clusters, and jointly taking action through congregations at the grassroots.

The field visit experience at Dutabarane

An exposure and learning field visit was carried out in two districts. Two groups headed for a field excursion in two districts thus; Musema and Ryansoro. The groups had interactive focused group discussion with both the beneficiaries and volunteers (peer-educators). From the interactions, it was established that Dutabarane program on HIV & AIDS and poverty works through Church Empowerment Clusters (CECs), with an average of 15 congregations per cluster within a distance of 20 km. Each cluster is interdenominational and has organized leadership in form of a committee including; the president, vice president and a delegate. The clusters work as the driving force for reaching the vulnerable households within the target communities. This is then replicated by nearby churches in the respective denominations.

Dutabarane mainly invests in training to achieve her objective and does not give any funds to the church for the activities. The training has a number of modules and they include; Facing AIDS Together, Choose Life, Our Children, Hope at Home, Families for Life and Shigikirana Savings for Life, where community members are trained to form own saving groups to care for those living with HIV and AIDS.

Volunteers/ peer educators' experience

Dutabarane uses volunteers from the clustered churches. These are trained and availed tools, thus the training materials which they use to further train participants selected from the churches within a particular cluster. The volunteers are not paid but rather motivated with a certificate after a period of almost two years of proven competence, commitment and action. They do this work as part of their ministry mandate and value caring for others. According to them, their source of motivation is;

- Training by Dutabarane gave them skills and confidence to do what they do which has benefited their families, local churches and the target communities.*
- The materials have content that speak to life for both the educators and those they reach or educate.*
- Despite the challenge of long distances covered with the furthest being about 20 KMs, and with no any facilitation, they still feel encouraged when they see churches responding positively.*
- The work they do as a result of the trainings has helped them pass on the right information about HIV and AIDS including the modes of transmission. Although stigma has persisted, more PLHIV are open, freely associating and participating in community activities. In addition, more people have opted to take the HIV test, and increasingly, young people are avoiding early sexual relationships*
- There is a sense of ownership, synergy, responsibility towards each other, practical networking and collaboration.*

The Beneficiaries' experiences

- *Members have access to credit which has helped them invest and generate income for their families. This at the same time has kept them busy as opposed to the past when they were idle and very poor.*
- *Members on the credit scheme are supportive to each other. For example, a widow testified that she was able to acquire land, grow food, and also plant trees which lifted her social economic status.*
- *The programme has built a sense of helping one another. The sick are now supported to access treatment.*
- *Stigma and denial is still experienced but reducing verified by those who are open about their status, taking HIV test and PLHIV freely participating in the church and the wider community.*
- *There is restored hope for the PLHIV, the widows and the orphans. For example, one of the clusters built a house for a widow from locally mobilized resources.*

Conclusion

Whilst previous review meetings gave an opportunity to the CCANets to reflect, assess themselves, share, learn and plan for the way-forward, this particular meeting hosted by Dutabarane provided exposure and a new dimension on how the mobilized church can be organized to work even more effectively as a network through congregations at the grassroots. This was clear from the approach of clustering churches and the benefits that come with it, such as a sense of ownership, synergy, responsibility towards each other and practical collaboration.

“PACANet in the Democratic Republic of Congo, district of Ituri”

Another step in expanding a coordinated Christian response to HIV and AIDS

In line with PACANet vision of an AIDS free Africa where the impact has been mitigated, and driven by the expressed need over time by the Christian fraternity from DRC during various occasions, the Call to Action conference (CAC) was held in February 2014, in the city of Bunia, Ituri district. The event set the platform for networking among churches on the common subject of HIV and AIDS.

Whilst the request was for a process that would reflect a national scope, considering the nature, complexity of infrastructure and the vastness of the country, in addition to the unpredictable political environment, a different approach as compared to other countries was adopted, hence the rationale of targeting a single district as opposed to a national approach.

The CAC was officially opened by the District Commissioner Mr. Jean Robert Moyemba. He recognized the important role of the church in addressing HIV and AIDS in Ituri and DRC in general. He further charged the participants to be honest, open and share experiences from their different contexts, as this would help generate ideas for relevant interventions. The commissioner also appreciated the efforts by PACANet for the people of DRC, a country that faced complex challenges at the time.



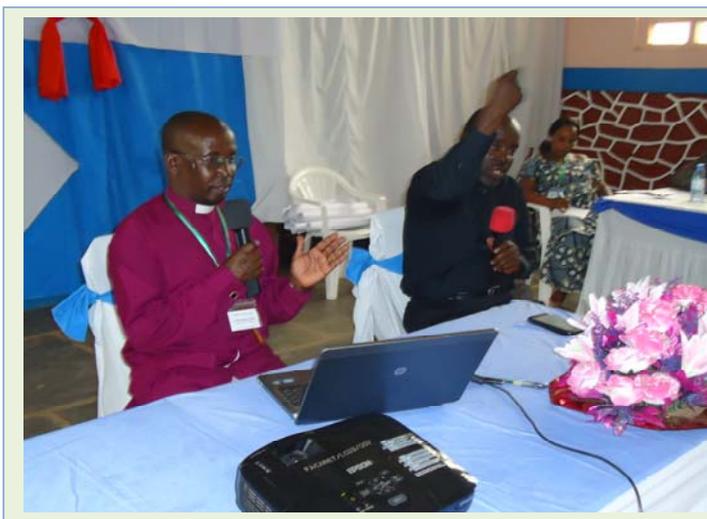
Commissioner during the official opening



Group Photo of Participants

At the conference, through different presentations, experience sharing and discussions, HIV and AIDS trends, the impact and interventions by both Government and the Church in DRC and more specifically in Ituri district were presented. This provided an opportunity for dialogue and identification of strategies for scaling up existing HIV and AIDS responses by the Church in the district. The presenters included; Dr. Roger Buju from government, on the HIV and AIDS situation, and the Church and government response, Fr. Justin Zanamuzi, on the impact of HIV and AIDS “*the case of Ituri district*”, Executive Secretary of PACANet Rev. Edward Baralemwa on HIV and AIDS & scripture, the Church’s Authority and Biblical mandate in the HIV and AIDS era.

- Stigma and discrimination remained a cross cutting issues were some church leaders were still reluctant to freely accommodate PLHIV. Examples of firing teachers and workers identified to be HIV positive still existed.
- Low level of knowledge of HIV and AIDS and consistent expression for awareness and the need for training.
- Traditional practices that fuel HIV and AIDS such as a practice were young girls are given away to entertain visitors in homes as a welcoming gesture.
- Silence on the subject of sex across all segments of society.
- The challenge of collaboration due to stringent doctrinal differences.
- The issue of testing for HIV. The group suggested that all conference participants become ambassadors, go for a test immediately after the conference.



Executive Secretary Rev. Edward Baralemwa

The presentations were followed by discussions. Below is the highlight of the crosscutting discussion points and recommendations.

Crosscutting issues & discussion points at the CAC

- The role and place of the condom in prevention. The concern that the use of condoms would only promote promiscuity.
- The issues of prayer and divine healing versus medication as promoted by some churches.

A major outcome was the taskforce put in place and led by Rt. Rev. William Bahemuka Mugenyi from the diocese on Boga Anglican Church to work with PACANet in collaboration with the Church in DRC to address the issues raised.

The event was closed by the district commissioner who recognized that PACANet had initiated a process that would compliment government efforts, and therefore assured the participants government support, and offered to be an Ambassador to the state about the work of the church in DRC.



'MACANet holds General Assembly'

A new board elected to steer the process in Madagascar

MACANet (Malagasy Christian AIDS Network) had a governance structure with a board of 14 members representing 7 Churches and 7 Christian organizations which formed the network. Whilst this composition posed some problems with some Churches and Christian organizations not initially represented opted to stay off, the 14 members had also outlived their period of service.

The new board was charged with the responsibility to ensure MACANet becomes more visible in a context where the HIV prevalence is very low at around 0.37% and infection restricted to a few sections of the population. The low prevalence makes it a challenge to carry out concerted interventions even at national level because HIV and AIDS is a condition very few people have seen, unlike the African mainland, where almost everyone knows someone who has it. As a result, many people are not convinced of the danger of AIDS. This includes both political and Church leaders. However, there is recognition that although the spread of HIV in Madagascar has been limited until now, the potential for an epidemic still exists.

The country's growing industries, mining, and tourism are all potential sources of rising HIV infection.

Key highlight of the Assembly

From the records, at inception of the network, emphasis was put towards prevention efforts through networking with the Church and the government. The general assembly held on the 13th January 2014 in Antananarivo, sought to give accountability and feedback to the constituency on what had transpired and the developments thereof. The reports indicated two notable reasons for the slow pace in all processes in response to HIV and AIDS as; a general slow culture in doing things, and the low HIV prevalence where some people still doubted whether HIV and AIDS actually existed and had the impact as recorded elsewhere. In response to the reports, the discussions generally charged MACANet to do more sensitization in the communities, and train more church leaders so that they take on this role in their congregations in Antananarivo and beyond. *"We don't have to wait until the prevalence gets to the levels as in most countries in the mainland"*

The event also saw the amendment of the constitution that open up membership on the board, this time unrestricted not as in previous phase where all members in the network had to have a board member which made a board of 14 members with Pastor Dr. William Razafimahatratra as the board chairman.

A new board was elected, this time reduced to 7 members with the board chairman Mr. Camille Rafalimanana who previously worked at Scripture Union Madagascar as coordinator of the HIV and AIDS programme.

PACANet provided technical assistance to the process and the event wound up with a meeting with the new board, in which the roles and responsibilities in relation to the context of Madagascar were discussed.

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