

Using Radio to Keep Young People in School

A community-based model in Zambia is integrating reproductive health and HIV/AIDS programming into this growing, national initiative.

Lusaka, Zambia – With some 750,000 children not attending school in 2000, the Zambia Ministry of Education conducted a needs assessment to determine why. Some of the reasons included having to walk long distances between home and school, being unable to pay for school fees and books, and being an AIDS orphan. Because radios are an inexpensive method for reaching youth, the Ministry decided to create the Interactive Radio Instruction (IRI) program to target youth living in squatter compounds and rural areas throughout Zambia. Research shows that school attendance is often associated with protective factors against sexual risk taking.

Through the IRI program, out-of-school children ages seven to 17 receive information on reproductive health (RH) and HIV/AIDS as well as traditional school subjects for grades 1 through 5. Volunteer teachers called community mentors guide the lessons, which are delivered by radio to groups of 40 to 50 youth in homes, backyards, churches, or simple cement-block classrooms. The project has grown from 15 to 450 meetings, now serving some 18,000 children throughout the country. The radio programs air Monday through Friday throughout the day, with continuous 30-minute sessions, organized by grade levels.

The sessions are taught in English, and the mentor translates the information into a local language. To participate, a community must identify a community mentor and a meeting place. The Ministry usually supplies the radios, but, where possible, communities purchase their own.

“We learn about traditional subjects such as English, math, science, and social studies,” says one student in a grade 4

class (ages nine to 12) meeting just outside of Lusaka. Another of the 17 students in the class says, “We learn about HIV/AIDS.”

Initially, the Ministry’s scriptwriters lacked confidence in developing radio programming that incorporated age-appropriate information on life skills, RH, sexuality, and HIV/AIDS. Also, the mentors lacked training in discussing these sensitive topics.

YouthNet provided training for both the writers and the mentors as part of larger assistance provided by the U.S. Agency for International Development and the U.S.-based Education Development Center. The YouthNet training has helped to institutionalize RH and HIV/AIDS information into this innovative radio broadcast system, operated in growing areas of the country by the Ministry’s Educational Broadcast Services Department (EBS).

Training and Community Mentors

In 2003, the project integrated life skills, RH, and HIV prevention messages, including objectives and storylines for 200 life skills segments, into the grade 4 core academic curriculum. YouthNet led a training of trainers for 21 staff from the EBS and other branches of the Ministry. The newly trained staff members, in collaboration with master trainers and under the supervision of YouthNet facilitators, then trained 400 community mentors in nine provinces.

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Communities identify their own mentors and support them through small payments of money or in-kind contributions (food, assistance with tending gardens, etc.). Some mentors are retired teachers, but most are young men and women. Mentors must be literate (i.e., completed at least grade 9) and undergo training to understand how the radio program works and what makes a good mentor.

Mentor training is a key part of the IRI program because some of the life skills topics are sensitive. Since the YouthNet training, the community mentors are able to teach more challenging topics, such as incest and rape. Mentors are also taught how to be resourceful and are encouraged to make their own materials and a “mentor’s kit.”

“The function of a mentor does not just end at the close of the radio broadcast,” says Foster Lubinda, acting controller for the EBS. Community mentors are often involved in post-broadcasting activities, such as assisting children with homework after hours or providing counseling. The mentors are often role models for their communities, respected by adults and youth alike.

The best features of the IRI program, says Lubinda, include the capacity to reach out-of-school children through radio and using drama and other interactive approaches. The program reaches both adults and children, through the mentors, with an emphasis on assertiveness and other life skills.

The IRI program faces challenges. Because mentor participation is voluntary, turnover is great, so a constant need to train new mentors exists. Government funding is limited, and financial sustainability is difficult. The IRI program would like to expand to higher grades to afford youth an opportunity to sit for national exams for secondary school, but it lacks the resources for this step.

Meanwhile, improvement in learning about sensitive topics is obvious. When asked what HIV is, a small boy from the grade 4 class outside of Lusaka replies, “It is a disease, a virus that causes AIDS.” Asked how HIV is transmitted, others answer: through sex, sharing of razor blades, blood transmission, between lovers, and from a mother to child.

— Jane Schueller

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YouthNet Briefs is an activity of YouthNet, a five-year program funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development to improve reproductive health and prevent HIV among young people. The YouthNet team is led by Family Health International and includes CARE USA and RTI International.