



Key Messages: An Update on the Impact of COVID-19 on Communities Affected by HIV and AIDS

The Stephen Lewis Foundation (SLF) provides funding to over 125 community-based organizations in the 15 countries that have been hardest hit by the AIDS pandemic in Africa. The SLF partners with organizations who work in six key areas: children and young people, grandmothers, home-based care, ending violence against women and girls, positive living, and health and human rights for LGBTIQ communities.

Sub-Saharan Africa is currently experiencing a third wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. The ongoing intersection of the HIV and COVID-19 pandemics directly impacts our partners' existing programs and services, and brings critical new challenges that are threatening the health, well-being, and safety of families and communities living with HIV and AIDS.

Some of the critical challenges that community-based organizations have shared about the impact of COVID-19 on their communities include:


1. Increased incidences of sexual and physical violence against women and girls. As a result, organizations have to respond to the growing need for safe spaces, mental health supports for their staff and clients, and legal services to seek justice for women and girls.
2. LGBTIQ communities are experiencing increased stigma, discrimination, and human rights violations, including criminalization of same-sex relationships, death threats, physical violence, and propaganda blaming the spread of COVID-19 on LGBTIQ communities.
3. Additional overhead costs to operate safely during the COVID-19 pandemic. Organizations must purchase protective equipment and sanitation supplies, and have increased home visits and deliveries to their clients which increases transportation and travel costs.
4. Community-based organizations are drawing on their decades of experience as first responders to the HIV and AIDS pandemic and their reputations as trusted organizations within communities to disseminate information about COVID-19 and the importance of vaccinations. When possible, and where vaccinations are available, our partners are providing transportation and logistics for their clients to get vaccinated.
5. Many funders have redirected financial support to COVID-19 specific responses. This is a further reduction to global funding for HIV and AIDS programs and responses, which has been on the decline for several years.

Key Statistics

- An estimated 38 million people globally are living with HIV, of those people, 20.6 million live in East and Southern Africa. (UNAIDS 2020)
- In 2020, approximately 1.5 million people globally contracted HIV, 670,000 of those people were located in East and Southern Africa. (UNAIDS 2020)
- In sub-Saharan Africa, six in seven new infections among adolescents aged 15–19 years are among girls. Young women aged 15-24 years are twice as likely to be living with HIV than men. (UNAIDS 2020)

Areas of Work

Take a closer look at the critical programs implemented by community-based organizations that must continue during the COVID-19 pandemic. UNAIDS estimates that by 2022, we could see an additional 293,000 HIV infections and an additional 148,000 AIDS-related deaths because of the effects of COVID-19 on communities and programs. Community-based organizations are best positioned to mitigate this.



Children and Young People

In 2015, there were 15 million children who had been orphaned by AIDS, and three million children living with AIDS, in sub-Saharan Africa. HIV positive children are often ostracized, isolated, and discriminated against, with little protection from abuse and sexual violence.

Community-based organizations have learned that HIV treatment must be delivered alongside comprehensive support for children's physical and mental health. They are supporting young people to remain HIV negative or maintain treatment into adulthood, stay in school, and participate as active members of their families and communities, and have a sense of agency about their futures.

Innovative initiatives that the SLF's partners run to support children and youth include:

- Compassionate pediatric palliative care
- Sexual and reproductive health education to prevent HIV and unwanted pregnancies
- Sports as a vehicle for health education and to advance women's and girls' rights
- Combatting stigma and discrimination through community outreach programs
- Leadership training, peer counseling and mentorship

Grandmothers

African grandmothers stepped in to care for millions of children struggling with the loss of their parents. In the midst of the HIV and AIDS pandemic, grandmothers become parents again at a time in their lives when they should be able to rest, take care of their health, and cope with their own grief.

The Stephen Lewis Foundation partners with organizations, often led by grandmothers themselves, that help grandmothers meet their families' basic needs and keep their grandchildren in school. With this support, and their own emotional resilience and fierce determination, African grandmothers have risen to become the linchpin of survival for their families and communities.

Supporting grandmothers involves a wide spectrum of support including:

- Home-based care for grandmothers and their households
- Paying school fees to keep children in grandmothers' care in school
- Parenting workshops on caring for traumatized children
- Grief counseling and peer support
- Food support, education on nutrition and gardening
- Training on income-generating activities
- Advocacy and leadership training
- Legal support for grandmothers

Ending Violence Against Women and Girls

Gender-based violence drives the HIV and AIDS pandemic in multiple ways. Rape and physical abuse is one clear violation of women's and girls' rights to bodily integrity and to live free from violence. Equally pernicious and widespread, is coercion – a myriad of damaging forms of non-consensual sex that women and girls are most susceptible to when they don't have economic autonomy, when they don't know their legal rights, and when there are not anti-violence advocates in the community.

In sub-Saharan Africa, approximately 4,200 young women between 15 and 24 years old acquire HIV every week. (UNAIDS 2020)

Community-based organizations are focusing on four intersecting areas.

1. Preventing violence by changing attitudes and behaviour – educating communities about women's rights, creating anti-violence committees, facilitating man-to-man groups.
2. Empowering women and girls to know their legal rights, pursue economic security, and stay in school.
3. Working with the criminal justice system to bring forward legal cases and enact gender responsive reforms.
4. Supporting survivors of sexual violence with safe refuges to heal and receive psychosocial support.

Home-based Care

The availability of anti-retroviral (ARV) medication has risen in sub-Saharan Africa in the last 10 years. Major funding for HIV and AIDS gets medication into government-sponsored health facilities, but often goes no further. People living in rural areas have tremendous difficulty accessing medication and the psychological and practical support needed to adhere to treatment.

Community-based organizations fill this gap with home-based care, bringing care direct to clients' homes. Home-based care workers forge close relationships with their clients and link them to additional support available from community-based organizations and formal health care centres. SLF partners that provide home-based care report ARV adherence rates for their clients well above regional averages, with more than half of partners reporting adherence rates over 95%.

Home-based care programs provide life-changing support including:

- Monitoring ARV adherence and treatment progress
- Ensuring adequate nutrition through direct food support and guidance on food preparation and gardening
- Identifying abusive situations and protecting women's rights
- Overcoming language barriers and discrimination that some communities face when interacting with government services and health centres

Positive Living

For millions of people, the increased availability of anti-retroviral (ARV) medication in sub-Saharan Africa means that HIV is no longer a death sentence. But, too often, stigma and discrimination against HIV-positive people lead to isolation and depression, which may prevent HIV positive individuals from accessing the support they need to adhere to medication and live healthy, full lives with HIV.

The international community's single-minded focus on delivering medication has come at the expense of support for the human dimensions of the AIDS crisis, often with deadly consequences. That's why the SLF partners with organizations led by and for HIV-positive people that deliver programs to support the physical, emotional, and medical needs of HIV-positive individuals.

Initiatives to support positive living include:

- Peer support groups for HIV-positive youth and adults to help them accept their HIV status and live positively
- Addressing the nutrition needs of HIV-positive people so they can adhere to treatment
- Legal support for women who face abuse or are removed from their homes because of their HIV status
- Treating opportunistic infections and ensuring the overall health of HIV positive people
- Supporting HIV positive people in taking on leadership and mentoring positions

Human Rights for LGBTIQ Communities

Stigma, discrimination and violence against LGBTIQ communities across the African continent create life-threatening barriers to health and social services. SLF partner organizations, run by and for LGBTIQ communities, provide healthcare, counselling, and legal and economic support. They are committed to repealing homophobic and transphobic laws and ensuring the health and human rights of all LGBTIQ individuals through legal action and advocacy.

The COVID-19 pandemic has heightened violence and discrimination toward LGBTIQ communities. Those who are isolated in transphobic and homophobic families face emotional and physical harm. Safety restrictions have interrupted access to food, important psychosocial supports, and HIV medications.

LGBTIQ organizations support their communities with ongoing programs and support during times of crisis, including:

- Emergency shelter for LGBTIQ community members who are driven from their homes
- Hotlines for reporting violence and abuse
- Peer support networks to provide phone-based psychosocial support
- Provision of food staples to those whose livelihoods have been impacted by COVID-19 lockdowns
- Providing access to HIV self-testing kits to avoid stigma and discrimination at health care centres.