

# IDF, GTZ Carry AIDS

By NICOLE MUIR

HIV/AIDS, has probably been the most used acronyms nowadays. Politicians, economists, Human Right activists, charity and donor organisations, preachers, musicians, the media, you name it, have hardly missed an opportunity to talk about effects of the killer disease, what has been done, and has to be done to bring the pandemic disease under control. In the same vein, hardly would you meet a person, at least in urban areas, who has not, at one time or the other heard about HIV/AIDS.

And what can be shown for all the exposure? Little, if one were to go by the statistics of HIV/AIDS in the country. Instead of dwindling, the number of newly infected cases is on the increase. Sexual promiscuity abounds. People, for one reason or the other, still engage in risky sexual activities. Mother to child transmission of the HIV virus still occurs, this, to a large extent because pregnant women don't know their HIV status, and therefore don't take precautionary measures.

Why this increasing exposure, despite the heavy financial, human and material resources that is continually being pumped in the fight to contain its spread? To some, like the Senior Divisional Officer, SDO, for Menchum, Mr. Enoch Abrams Egebe, this situation is a consequence of the fact that the "AIDS fight in the country is too functionalised." Too much talk and little action. Others find fault with the approach. To them, most of the approaches under use lack focus, which explains why education and information dissemination on HIV/AIDS prevention, has not, in many cases been translated to behaviour change.

It was in line with this, that a Bamenda based NGO, Integrated Development Foundation, IDF, in partnership with the Health Project of the GTZ, organised a two-month pilot HIV/AIDS sensitisation programme in the Menchum Division of the Northwest Province. The programme, which is going on presently, aims at carrying the AIDS prevention message to all the nooks and crannies of the division, and to empower them with the knowledge of the pandemic, so that those who are already infected can live positively with it.

According to the Assistant Co-ordinator of IDF, Mr. Jean Baptiste Dja, the need for this HIV/AIDS sensitisation programme was felt, after his organisation, which has carried out some developmental projects in the area, realised that an improvement on purchasing power, instead promoted promiscuity. Excess money, far from being used to improve on the standard of living, is used to purchase the services of sex workers. The result, is an increase in the prevalence of HIV/AIDS in the region. It therefore becomes necessary, that the AIDS issue be handled alongside other developmental projects.

The GTZ, on its part, agreed to sponsor the programme, since it is in line with government's goal to sensitise the population, including those in remote areas, on STIs and HIV/AIDS prevention. According to the co-ordinator of the GTZ Youth and Adolescent Reproductive Health Project, Dr. Flavien Ndonko, this project will be used as a working document for subsequent HIV/AIDS sensitisation projects in other areas.

The peculiarity of this project, says the representative

of the Delegate of Public Health for the Northwest Province, Mr. Martin Numfor, who has been following the activities of the sensitisation team, "is that it has really reached the grassroots." According to Mr. Numfor, although the Northwest Delegation of Public Health has carried out similar projects in other parts of the province "it was not this intensive, and did not really get into the suburbs as this GTZ/IDF project has done. Of course, we are limited by means."

The HIV/AIDS team, which included a resource person, a representative of the Northwest Delegate of Public Health, animators from IDF, as well as two HIV positive persons, moved from village to village to sensitise and in the case of the HIV positive persons, give testimonies about their conditions. The sensitisation programme in the various villages offered an opportunity for villagers to exchange views, air their doubts and give their own suggestions on possible solutions to the AIDS problem.

## Impact On Population

"After this sensitisation programme, I am sure things will not be the same again in this village." This is the opinion of one villager who talked to *The Post* after witnessing a sensitisation programme in his village. The reason for this, says Mr. John Acho Ewi, a 41-year-old farmer in the Wum Division, is that "our biggest problem here, has been ignorance and rumour. This programme, has, however, made it possible for everyone to hear for himself the real facts of the disease."

According to another farmer, Mr. Julius Amah Akono, "this is the first time that an HIV/AIDS sensitisation team is coming right to the grassroots to pass across the AIDS message in this area." Most organisations, he said, organise activities in community halls and other areas, where "only the big shots attend."

To a teacher in GBS Wum, Mr. Sylvester Teug, the fact that the sensitisation programme brought together people of all ages, and different walks of life, gave an opening for families, friends and the society at large to discuss freely, issues relating to HIV/AIDS and reproductive health. Dr. Grace Fouhad, a resource person in the programme, shared this point of view, according to her, parents who have usually been afraid to discuss matters with their children, would be freer to do so now. This relaxed atmosphere, she said, could already be felt during the sensitisation meetings, during which men, women and youths asked questions, contributed and

used words that were hitherto unheard of in such gatherings.

To one of the youths, the highlight of the sensitisation programme was the demonstration of the use of condoms. "I always thought knowledge on this concerned only men, so I really never bothered to check on how well it was used. But you can be sure that from now, I will make sure it is done properly... why not put it on my partner myself?"

To yet another youth, testimonies by persons living with HIV helped to demystify HIV/AIDS. "I never thought that HIV positive people could lead a normal life. The testimonies, by persons, who looked as healthy as anyone convinced others on the notion of healthy carriers."

Many people realised the need for knowing their HIV status, after lectures by resource persons. This could be seen from demand by many, that the HIV test be offered for free. According to them, many are willing to do the test but can't, for financial reasons.

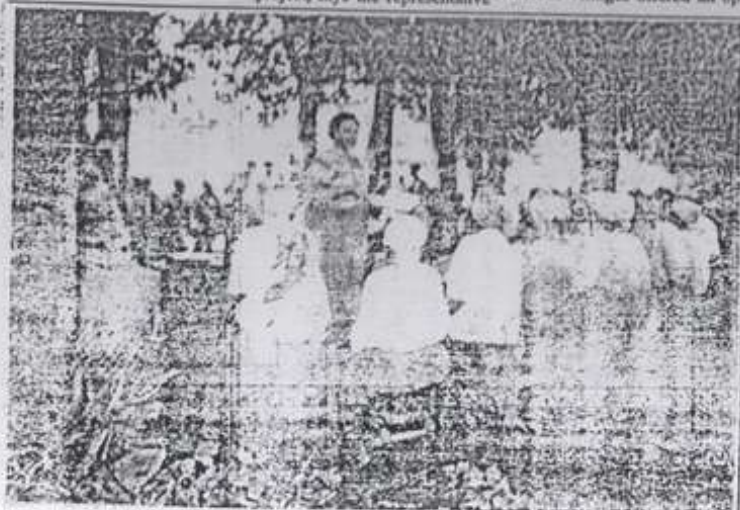
The interest in voluntary testing was enthusiastically received because before the sensitisation, very few people showed up for the test. According to records at the District Hospital, out of about 100 positive cases in the year 2000, not up to five came voluntarily for the test.

## The Concerns Of The Public

Since HIV/AIDS relates to sex, many people were interested in how HIV could fit into sex and how it could be prevented. For example, if a woman becomes pregnant, how can she reduce her risk of HIV as a sexually transmitted infection? How can a couple continue their sexual life if one is already HIV positive? What actions



AIDS sensitisation team brave bad roads to get to the suburbs



Villagers listen to lectures on HIV prevention

# Fight To The Grassroots

you take to protect yourself if you suspect your partner of being unfaithful?

These questions and more characterised the sensitisation meetings. Since the approach used allowed for participation, the issues were discussed by all and possible solutions were arrived at.

## Myths And Cultural Practices Affecting HIV Spread

Because most people in the rural areas do not get first-hand information from experts on HIV/AIDS, they depend mostly on rumours and from their own beliefs about the disease.

One of the most striking myths about HIV/AIDS, that the sensitisation team came across in some villages around the Menchum valley, is that the virus is transmitted by dogs. And of course, all the dogs there were killed. The danger here, according to Dr. Fombad, is that ignorance about the actual routes through which the virus infects people make them vulnerable to the disease.

Another interesting myth is that the HIV virus has been introduced into condoms, and so using them is more dangerous than doing without it. The danger of this belief cannot be over emphasised because that belief alone does not stop indiscriminate sexual activities.

Concerning cultural factors that might contribute to the spread of the HIV, fingers were pointed at the system of maternal lineage that obtains among the Aghem people of Menchum. According to one of the elite of the area, this tradition, which allows the nephew of a family head to inherit his uncle's property and wife, if he so wishes, endangers the heir if the deceased and his wife were HIV positive. Again, the heir might neglect the widow and her children, thereby forcing them into prostitution.

This laxity also extends to youths, mostly females who "are expected to produce kids as early as possible." It goes without saying that exposing oneself to pregnancy, without the benefit of the HIV test for both parties, entails risking HIV and other infections.

Another dangerous cultural factor that has been identified in some villages in Menchum, is the practice of the *Country Sunday*, a practice which allows for husbands and wives to be unfaithful on such days. Many, however, say such practices are dying out, especially among the educated class.

## The Role Of The Church

The Christian Church is getting more and more involved in the fight against HIV/AIDS, particularly in the area of prevention and counselling. Most Churches, in Menchum, are ad-

ressing the problem of HIV/AIDS and human sexuality with openness, compassion and solidarity.

According to the Parish Priest of Wum, Rev. Father Joseph Mbiydzeyuy, "we have developed a strategy in which we are very frank. We don't use blanket terms anymore, because people refuse to understand them."

Due largely to the stigma surrounding HIV/AIDS, many people find it difficult to accept their statuses. Here, the Church's role of providing psychological balance for the disturbed is indispensable. According to Fr. Mbiydzeyuy, many HIV positive persons have come to him for spiritual counselling.

Since youths are the most infected, Churches are getting more youths to be involved in youth associations and programmes in the Church. Fr. Anthony Bangi, still of the Wum Parish, says such programmes have been having a positive effect on the youths.

Some of the youths that were met in the villages actually said they do not use condoms, because it has been criticised by the Church. "The unfortunate thing about this, is that they believe the Church but ignore the part that condemns premarital sex," says one Wum youth, Pamela Bih. This prompted another youth to propose that the Church insists on abstinence and fidelity, but remains silent on the issues of condoms.

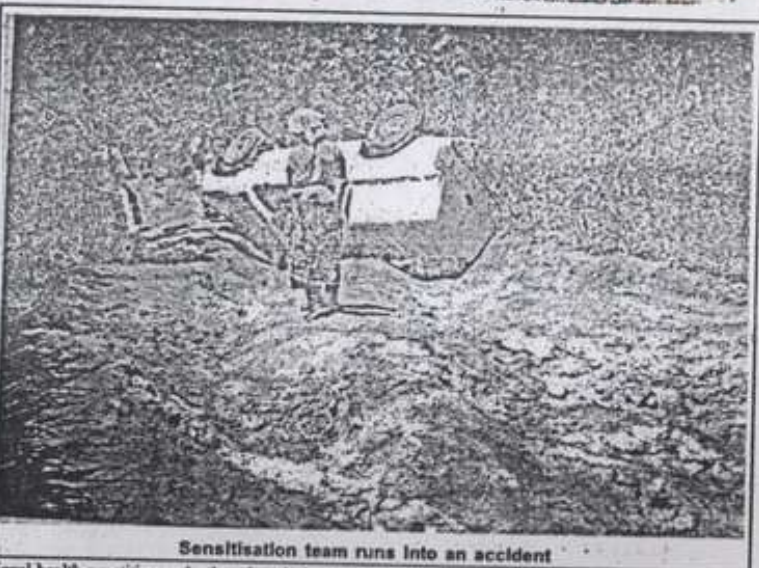
This of course was not well received by Church authorities who hold that condoms have led to an increase in sexual activities, and a consequent increase in HIV/AIDS. To them, there is no guarantee that condoms are even properly used by all who rely on them.

## Working With Traditional Health Practitioners

In Menchum, as in other areas, there is increasing recognition of the role of traditional health practitioners in the prevention and treatment of opportunistic infections related to HIV/AIDS.

The problem, however, is the claim, by most traditional practitioners that they do cure HIV/AIDS. From all indications, some of these practitioners have succeeded in convincing some members of the public who flock to them for treatment.

Medical authorities in Menchum Division, as well as the general public deny this claim. According to a nurse in the Wum District Hospital, who also doubles as a herbalist, Mr. Peter Amah Ndeh, "these are all false claims." Mr. Amah, who works in collaboration with the tradi-



Sensitisation team runs into an accident

tional health practitioners in the division, says the only relief they give HIV/AIDS patients is the treatment of opportunistic infections. He goes further to say that he has sent a number of AIDS patients to some of these healers, but their HIV test results remain positive.

This notwithstanding, Mr. Amah says research is going on, on these purported HIV/AIDS drugs, to see if they contain substances that can help in eradicating the HIV virus. According to him, those HIV positive people who are willing, are given the treatment. This, he says is not dangerous because such herbs have been proven to be non-toxic to the human system.

Concerning the role of these practitioners in the prevention of HIV/AIDS, regular meetings involving them and medical personnel are held to educate them on prevention methods, mostly

in relation to practices such as scarification, says the District Medical officer for the Wum Health District, Dr. Victor Akeh Achi.

Most importantly, they have influence in the community; they understand local belief systems and can explain illnesses in ways that members of their community can understand.

## NGO Activities

Reports from the Divisional Office of Menchum says only about five groups are actively participating in the fight against HIV/AIDS in the Division, among them, the Menchum Union of Traditional Doctors, the Aghem Women's Union and a youth group, Fighters of AIDS and TB, FATWA.

The sad thing about these associations, according to the SDO for Menchum, Mr. Enoch Abrams Egbe, is that most of their ac-

tivities are centred around the towns, while the interiors are left to depend on rumours for information. Their major complaint is lack of finances to carry out elaborate programmes.

According to the co-ordinator of FATWA, Mr. Ivor Ghong, his organisation, which is based in Wum, has been involved in distributing posters only, and other material to the public. For now, their only source of finance is contribution from members, which amount to very little.

The Wum Council has not been indifferent to the fight. According to the Mayor of Wum, Mr. Ghong, a lot has been done in the field of sensitisation, and has worked in collaboration with the medical sector, and other organisations to help in the prevention campaign. To him, if the fight is to be won, a lot more still has to be done.

## GTZ Involvement In AIDS Fight

The GTZ Health Project is involved in the AIDS fight at various levels.

- It trains peer educators on reproductive health and HIV/AIDS prevention in response to the need of youths, who generally depend on friends for solutions to their reproductive health problems.
  - It is also involved in the sensitisation of villages and towns on the existence, and need to prevent HIV/AIDS.
  - It organises seminars, workshops and meetings for various groups of persons in the community in order to get everyone involved in the fight.
  - It works in collaboration with video clubs to counter the effects of pornographic films on youths. Its intervention is in the form of distributing educative cassettes and other material, as well as educating those who run such clubs on reproductive health issues and HIV/AIDS prevention.
  - The GTZ Health project has also been very involved in reinforcing associations of persons living with the HIV virus. It has been instrumental in the creations of such organisations in the Northwest and Southwest provinces, that have tended to lag behind in this area.
  - Another intervention has been in the creation of an association of teenage mothers to help young girls avoid early and unwanted pregnancies and the consequences.
- All in all, the GTZ Health Project has made sure that the multi-sectoral approach in the fight against HIV/AIDS is implemented.