Unicef project Kicking AIDS out of Kenya

A project for women against HIV/AIDS

Zainabu kicks AIDS out of her life

Mwamgunga Primary School in Kenya’s Kwale district lets out at three in the afternoon. A few minutes later fifteen-year old Zainabu Kazungu Nyamvula and her school friends gather for their daily football practice.

A year ago Zainabu joined her school’s football team, which was formed with aid from Unicef. She is now the captain. On the bare field she commands respect and is a role model for the other girls at school. ‘My parents thought that football was really for boys,’ she explains. ‘But my teacher convinced them that I would learn a lot from the sport. He was right,’ Zainabu continues. ‘Now I understand the risks associated with AIDS and know how to avoid becoming infected.’ She is no longer intimidated by boys trying to seduce her. And she is happy to share what she has learned with the other girls on her team. Zainabu’s school performance has not been affected by her interest in her favourite sport. In fact, the headmaster reports that her marks have improved since she started to play football. Zainabu would like to continue to play and hopes to go professional. And what about after her football career? ‘I’ll be a teacher.’

Unicef supports various development projects, in which sports figure prominently. One of these projects, Kicking AIDS out of Kenya, is aimed at forming girls’ football teams in several districts in Kenya as a vehicle toward teaching them to avoid becoming infected with HIV/AIDS. The project includes interesting lessons about the role of sports in the fight against HIV/AIDS and in the struggle for gender empowerment.

Reason

A considerable share of Kenya’s population is HIV positive. The 2003 Kenya Demographic and Health Survey (KDHS) indicates that 6.7% of the population is HIV positive. This rate varies depending on the region and exceeds 30% in some. Infection rates vary considerably between boys and girls. Girls aged 15 to 19 are seven times more likely than boys in this age group to become infected. The same study has noted considerable gender inequality. Women do not figure in decision-making processes. They are not entitled to own property, are often abused and are severely overworked. Education is considered more important for boys than for girls.

These findings reveal that in Kenya young adults, especially young girls and women, need help to become more self-sufficient and more independent. They also need to be informed and to be taught how to protect themselves against HIV/AIDS. Broaching sensitive subjects such as HIV/AIDS and sex, however, is far from easy. Appropriate and appealing associative links need to be available.

The role of sports

Sports (i.e. football in this case) is one such associative link. At practice sessions coaches are able to address sensitive subjects such as HIV/AIDS and sex. But football has more to offer: it is a vehicle for informing the community as well. At tournaments, banners, music and performances at half-time convey messages to the public that get through to young men as well.
Through sports, girls learn to speak up for themselves. They also have the opportunity to excel and to become more self-confident and self-aware. Team sports such as football teach girls how to operate as a group. All this places girls in a better position to discuss sex with boys as equals and to oppose them as needed.

This makes sports an appropriate means for Unicef to pursue several of its core objectives. In addition to serving as a vehicle, sport is an objective in its own right. All children have the right to participate in sports and to play games. In a setting where girls and women are responsible for the heaviest household chores, sport, according to Unicef, is a rare opportunity for diversion and enjoyment.

**Kicking AIDS out of Kenya**

In several districts in Kenya, Unicef has launched a football project for girls who attend school as well as for those who do not, plus a component for adult women. This project serves two purposes:

- Unicef aims to use football to make girls and women more self-sufficient and to teach them to take carefully-considered decisions about their sexual activities and other important choices in their lives.
- Unicef hopes to use football to raise awareness about HIV/AIDS in the communities in the different districts.

Achieving these objectives requires:

- setting up an active football association for girls in school and out-of-school and for women in local organisations, so that girls and women may participate in football practice sessions, games and tournaments
- building capacity among girls and women to organise tournaments, referee matches and coach teams
- building capacity among girls and women to act as peer educators about life skills and HIV/AIDS
- forming a few active youth associations in each district through community theatre, videos and the like to raise awareness about how to stay HIV negative.

Unicef intends to realise this format by working with local NGOs such as the Mathare Youth Sports Association (MYSA) and grassroots organisations such as Moving the Goal Posts, which is dedicated to empowering girls through football and is already active in one of the regions and with the Kenyan authorities.

The most important activities in the project are providing services that cater to young people (especially supporting girls’ football), teaching ‘life skills’, and offering optional HIV advice and testing for young people. The project is aimed at mobilising and raising awareness among the community as a whole, especially among parents, teachers, community leaders and clergy, about HIV/AIDS. Specific project activities include:

- training young girls to play football and to serve as referees and coaches
- teaching life skills and HIV/AIDS peer education
- training people to develop information, education and communication materials that cater to young people
- organising district tournaments
- supporting friendly matches between project areas
- assisting youth clubs in organising theatre productions
• acquiring the necessary sports materials, such as sports attire, footballs and whistles
• providing information, education and communication materials, such as HIV/AIDS information posters and videos
• arranging for the project to be monitored continuously and providing administrative support.

**Unicef scores**

Unicef has now issued two progress reports on the project revealing that the football project format is effective. Over 200 football teams are now active in the Kwale District. Awareness of HIV and AIDS has clearly improved: the number of HIV tests taken voluntarily by young people is rising. During a regional football tournament in the Kwale District, for example, 180 young people had themselves tested.

**Cultural perception and attitudes are changing**

Several communities where the project is being conducted are primarily Islamic. Before the project, nobody in these communities believed that women could play football. Nor could anybody imagine women wearing football shorts, as their legs would be exposed. Involving imams, local authorities and community leaders in organising local tournaments has helped modify cultural perceptions and attitudes toward women in the community. Most families encourage their daughters to participate in the football tournaments. Many of them wear sports attire.

**Leadership, mastering life skills and capacity building**

One hundred and fifty girls (80 girls from the Kwale District, 30 from Mombasa, 20 from Garissa and 20 from Kilifi) have now been trained as football coaches and referees. Each of them has obtained a Third Grade diploma from the Kenyan football association. This diploma qualifies them to work at official football matches and to receive payment and has increased their self-confidence, as well as providing them with a source of income. This has helped make them less vulnerable and socially dependent. As a result, these girls are on a more equal footing to discuss sex with boys and thus less likely to become infected with HIV/AIDS. In the Kilifi District trained peer educators planned and organised the district football tournament. In doing so, they demonstrated to teachers, parents, youths and the entire community that girls are capable of organising their own activities.

Life-skills training was offered to 20 peer educators from the Mathare Youth Sports Association (MYSA). Thanks in part to this training, peer educators dealt with two cases of rape in their community and arranged for the girls to go to a local women’s hospital for treatment and follow-up care.

**Plans for the future**

• Unicef intends to extend the football project to other parts of Kenya as well. Staff in Kenya is needed to monitor progress and spending.
• Unicef aims to set up an official football competition in five areas.
• Trainers are needed who in addition to addressing football technique will consider HIV and social skills.
• Referees need to be trained, and materials are needed, from balls to white chalk.

**Lessons learned**
• In keeping with the activities organised by Unicef, girls have continued playing football on their own. In several areas they have formed their own teams. This takes courage in a conservative Muslim community.
• Elaborating on lessons learned from project partners, this project highlights the positive impact of activities that girls and women organise on their own. Arranging football tournaments, acting as referees at football matches or coaching football teams greatly enhances self-awareness and self-confidence among girls and women. In the end, this should improve the position of girls and women in the community and reduce their likelihood of becoming infected with HIV/AIDS.
• The girls report that men often come watch these competitions, because they cannot believe that girls know how to play football. The encouragement that the girls then receive from boys and men reveals how girls’ football can help eliminate gender stereotypes about the abilities of girls and women.
• In addition to the girls, other members of the community are involved in the project, especially parents, teachers and religious leaders. This makes the project more effective.

What are the key ingredients for a successful sports and gender project?
• The community needs to be mobilised and involved.
• The players and the community should assume part of the responsibility for managing the project, including organising tournaments.
• All players need to be committed.
• Girls are to be involved in all facets of the project.

What are the most serious pitfalls for a sports and gender project?
• Inadequate financing.
• Negative cultural and religious standards and values regarding gender empowerment.

What are the main do’s and don’ts in a sports and gender project?

Do’s:
• Involve the community in planning and execution.
• Aim for transparency and accountability.

Don’ts:
• Mismanage funds and resources.
• Treat the community and its culture and religious standards and values with disrespect.

What are the main ingredients for a successful sports and HIV/AIDS project?
• Be innovative
• Choose a sport that is popular among young people (football is popular among all young people).
• Football attracts spectators and provides an opportunity to convene an entire community for a tournament.
• Information about HIV/AIDS is distributed throughout the community in the local languages and through accessible forms of art and theatre (drama and poetry) that appeal to people of all ages.
• All sectors and communities work together as a team (healthcare, sports, education, community and young people).
• Qualified and professional coaches and trainers.
• Integration of voluntary HIV tests.
• Focus on prevention for those not infected.

What are the most serious pitfalls for the sports and HIV/AIDS project?
• Funding needs to be sufficient to expand this initiative throughout the country.
• In some areas girls are prohibited from participating because of the prevailing cultural values.
• Misconceptions and stigmas about HIV/AIDS persist in several of the remote communities where the Kicking out AIDS project has been conducted.