The Power of One: Zimbabwe

Leadership is local.

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Zimbabwe, a southern Africa nation rich in natural resources but governed by the autocratic Robert Mugabe, is notorious for having both the world's highest infection rate and -- not coincidentally -- its worst record against AIDS. In the absence of a comprehensive government strategy, NGOs have taken on most of the burden, especially in the two largest cities, Harare (the capital), where PWAs founded The Centre, and Bulawayo.

For a decade, the leading organization in Bulawayo has been the Matabeleland AIDS Council (MAC), launched by concerned locals who foresaw the devastating effect the epidemic would have. The group, which is funded primarily by international aid groups with a little help from the government, has focused mainly on prevention programs and support for people with HIV. It currently has about 1,000 regular clients, although it reaches thousands more through outreach programs including drop-in counseling, phone and mail answering services, home visits and training for home care.

On the prevention front, MAC's Youth STD/HIV Prevention Program is based on the sophisticated peer-education approach and provides teens with information about how to avoid pregnancy as well as all STDs, not just HIV. Ndumiso Mnkandla, a peer educator from Hillside Teachers College, says, "In colleges we have come up with methods to catch the attention of our colleagues, such as debates, quizzes and video shows. We need to help each other watch our behavior and minimize the spread of HIV."

MAC's most important innovation may be its most recent one -- a public awareness campaign to change the way AIDS is viewed in Zimbabwean society. MAC officials gave more than 40 journalists from around the country a crash course in HIV's myths and realities, and as a result some media members have combined to form a working group to establish guidelines for reporting on AIDS and have a forum to discuss their own prejudices and fear.

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