

World AIDS Day Conference 2004 Report

Introduction

This was the third annual conference for World AIDS Day and the second in a row that all three coordinating organizations worked together. The conference organizing committee was made up of staff and volunteers from People To People Aid Organization (Canada), The Ethiopian Association in Toronto, Women's Health in Women's Hands and Canadian Feed The Children.

Each of the organizations involved is affected by the global and local impact of HIV in the communities that we live in and work with. Although the organizations have different missions and focus populations, the impact of HIV is a thread that is common to all.

The expectations for this year were to have lively and engaging presenters that would challenge the audience to think compassionately about the situations women and girls face, here in Canada and abroad. The focus was on HIV/AIDS and the obstacles women and girls have in keeping themselves safe and healthy as well as the orphan crisis.

In past conferences, many of the participants were from the Ethiopian community. We were expecting a broader representation of the public at this year's conference, including government staff, university and secondary school students, other development organizations and AIDS service providers.

Background and Theme

UN AIDS selects a theme for World AIDS Day each year and develops communication pieces, posters and information specifically for that topic. The conference committee chose to stay with the UN AIDS 2004 theme of *Women and Girls* for this year's conference. This would allow congruence in messages that public might have seen on television, newspapers and on the Internet. A special sub-theme for the conference was on African women and orphans.

Publicity

Ads were designed and placed in TZTA Newspaper on the October 24 and November 8 issues. Radio announcements on Radio Lisan on AM 530 every Wednesday for four weeks. Admas TV (OMNI 2) also made television announcement for two months.

A colour poster, colour flyer and a T-shirt was designed for the event. Each member of the coordinating committee distributed flyers and posters for display in their organization and community. The T-shirts were given to volunteers and speakers at the conference.

A press release was sent to all major Toronto newspapers, radio and television stations as well as community and ethnic newspapers, university press and radio stations.

Acknowledgement

Acknowledgement of funders was made on medium-sized posters, flyers, radio, television, newspapers, T-shirts, People to People website and through email. It was also done at the conference venue verbally, through power point presentation and a display of large poster at the entrance of the hall.

Conference Outline

Attendees were asked to register and pick up a conference package before 11 am on Sunday, November 28 at Metro Hall. The conference was located in the Council Chamber and was very easy to locate. Coffee and muffins were available to warm up the attendees.

The conference was organized to have speakers present and answer a few quick questions before moving on to the next guest speaker. Longer discussions were going to be facilitated through the small group discussions and during the lunch break.

Speakers

The morning started with welcomes from representatives from People To People and The Ethiopian Association in Toronto. Support from the donors was recognized and thanked.

The keynote speaker was the Minister of Health, Hon. George Smitherman. He spoke briefly about personal experiences with HIV and the dimensions of the disease in Ontario. The Minister left the conference after his presentation to attend another event.

Ms. Eunadie Johnson, Executive Director of Women's Health in Women's Hands was the next presenter with an engaging lecture on Women, Girls, Gender Inequality and HIV. A seasoned speaker, she was able to provide anecdotes to illustrate the salient points in her presentation.

Jacobeth Edith Wambeyi, the Executive Director of Health and Life Promotion Research Consultancy gave a brief update on the development of microbicides and the potential impact for women and girls who are at risk, regardless of where they live. A lunch break followed.

Right after lunch a video from Adams TV called "Whose children are they now? AIDS orphans in Ethiopia" was presented about AIDS and orphans in Ethiopia. Many people commented that the film was very moving and realistically illustrated the plight of orphans in Ethiopia. The film was an appropriate lead in to the next speaker.

Michael Meegan, Director of International Community for the Relief of Suffering and Starvation was the presenter for the afternoon session. As a medical doctor working in Africa for the last 20 years, his presentation was informative and passionate about the impact the HIV/AIDS is having on the most vulnerable populations. His analysis of international donors, international development and the public revealed the hypocrisy of international aid and the need to focus eliminating poverty, the cause of the rampant spread of HIV in developing countries.

Gale Thomas, Director of Programs at Canadian Feed The Children presented the closing remarks for the conference.

Evaluation Results

The evaluation sheets asked attendees to rate the presentations based on their relevance, whether new information was provided, value of the presentation, and the evaluation of the discussion and the overall rate of the presentation. A summary of the evaluation ratings follows:

Excellent:	44%
Very Good:	38%
Good:	14%
Moderate:	4%
Not Adequate:	> 1%

Many of the comments recommended inviting more participants, particularly from other communities, age groups and organizations in the city. Some suggested that Sunday may not be the best day and may attract a larger crowd, including faith-based organizations, if held on a different day.

Overall the comments appreciated the bringing together of the expertise and information of the speakers. A comment from one of the evaluation forms summarizes many of the comments: "very helpful, moving and educational".

Concluding Remarks

The conference was a success in terms of providing information that is thought provoking that will challenge some of the opinions held by the public. The quality of presentations was excellent both in terms of educational value and style.

The tight timelines required dropping the small group discussions resulting in a less participatory event. However many people were eager to ask questions or make comments on the presentations.

The overall turnout was adequate but it more attention needs to be addressed to increasing attendance and possibly diversifying the representation of participants. Members of the general public who are not fully aware of the impact of HIV in communities at home and abroad should be encouraged to attend. The coordinating committee will need to devise a strategy to target and attract a more diverse section of the public.

The conference is picking up momentum. The attendance increased to over 140 participants and 35 organizations active in the Toronto area and several more organizations have asked to participate. In 2005 more organizations will be asked to join the coordinating committee. This should assist in boosting the numbers of participants.