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Action against stigma brings hope to Ethiopia's agricultural cooperatives

Ajama Kalacha works hard on his small agricultural plot in Ethiopia's highlands to provide an income for the extended family he supports. Even though life is tough, Ajama is an optimist - his community treats him well and he believes his prospects for making a living from the land are good. But he was not always so confident.

Seven years ago, Ajama discovered that he had become infected with HIV. At the time stigma and discrimination were widespread in his community and the diagnosis led him to despair. Today Ajama is taking antiretrovirals and his condition is under control. He has told everyone about his HIV status, and his children and extended family have not been excluded from school or community life as he had feared.

"My message to others is that living positively with HIV helps you to work harder and leads to a new lifestyle," he says. "The care and support that I have received has made it much easier for me to cope with my illness."



Ajama Kalacha gets ready to plough – his community's support has made it easier for him to cope with HIV

This dramatic change in Ajama's attitude and circumstances came about in 2004 when his

agricultural cooperative society in West Oromia State became part of a wider programme to reduce the effects of HIV. Funded by the Italian government in cooperation with the International Labour Organization (ILO), the programme works through the Oromia region agricultural cooperative unions that have members in over 200 agricultural primary societies and 14 transport associations.

To ensure that interventions were at the right level, staff carried out an initial study of HIV knowledge and attitudes, which revealed many misunderstandings. For instance 51 per cent of those interviewed thought HIV could be transmitted by mosquito bites, 17 per cent by sharing a toilet and 6 per cent by working with an HIV-positive person.

The programme has strong support from government and the national cooperative leadership. It works through a range of training interventions, firstly raising awareness of HIV at the leadership level and then, through specific workshops, training a network of master trainers and peer educators. They in turn roll out the programme at community level, helping to challenge discrimination, change risky behaviour, and set up care and support services for members and their families.

Easily identified by their bags and T-shirts that both bear the slogan, 'HIV/AIDS does not discriminate, but people do', the peer educators work with the whole community visiting homes, speaking at community gatherings and involving key individuals such as religious leaders. They use an HIV manual and distribute popular information materials that have been translated into the local languages of Afaan Oromo and Amharic. They also help to provide care and support services including treatment.

In Ajama's cooperative, misunderstandings about HIV together with the stigma and discrimination directed against those affected have gradually reduced as a result of this steady work. The positive environment and encouragement he has received gave Ajama the courage to speak out about his status and to have hope for the future. "I set my mind to starting a new

life," he says. "The care and support for people living with HIV and AIDS has helped greatly to reduce its impact on our lives."

The wider picture

The Italian government funded HIV/AIDS project in the regional state of Oromia is implemented by the ILO Programme on HIV/AIDS and the world of work. To date over 600,000 cooperative members, transport operators, passengers and their families have participated in awareness-raising sessions about HIV.

At leadership level, 24 transport company owners and managers have attended two-day workshops that aim to improve commitment and provide adequate support to HIV activities. Similarly 134 cooperative leaders from national government through to cooperative board of directors and managers level have been through the same process. A total of 39 master trainers from cooperatives and 16 master trainers from the transport sector have been trained.

At peer educator level, 428 cooperative members and 21 transport operators have successfully completed a five-day training course on the basics of HIV/AIDS, HIV prevention, VCT and behaviour change.

Drama shows, songs and poems, together with the involvement of people living with HIV, made the training lively and enjoyable. Refresher courses have also been well attended.

Making a difference

The project has led to the development of the Oromia Cooperative Workplace HIV/AIDS Guideline that has been translated into Afaan Oromo. An independent evaluation at the end of 2007 found a noticeable reduction in high risk behaviour such as unprotected sex, multiple sexual partners, alcohol abuse and some harmful traditional practices. Workers also noticed less stigma and improved relationships among co-workers. There is a high demand for the programme in neighbouring cooperatives and regional states.

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