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Garage programme in Ghana sets good practice

When a car needs attention in downtown Accra, the Odawna Light Industrial area is the place to go. In one of the biggest garage communities in the country, literally thousands of operators live and work in a maze of small plots at Odawna, employing large numbers of young apprentices and keeping an extensive support economy of food vendors and other suppliers in business.

The garages at Odawna have organized themselves into a consortium belonging to the Ghana National Association of Garages (GNAG), which has 40,000 members nationwide and 4,000 in Odawna itself.



Some apprentices from the Odawna Garages Association at work

A growing concern has been how to protect the workforce from the risk of HIV. Drug dealers and commercial sex workers operate in the area and alcohol is easily available. Most of the workers are young and poor, often living away from their families.

“When we first heard of HIV we practically believed it was a monster coming to swallow us up. Our population is overwhelmingly youthful and we believe this increases their vulnerability and the risk of contracting HIV,” says Alhaji Dakpo, Accra Regional Chairman of the GNAG. “Information and education was not reaching our garages and it was badly needed for our members.”

The garages’ consortium at Odawna linked up with

the International Labour Organization (ILO) in 2004 through its project funded by the US Department of Labor. It started by running a survey among the garage workers that confirmed a general lack of knowledge about HIV and its transmission. With ILO support, the GNAG identified 50 peer educators who went through extensive education and training on HIV issues. To encourage participation, workers received an allowance to cover the income they lost while carrying out HIV activities.

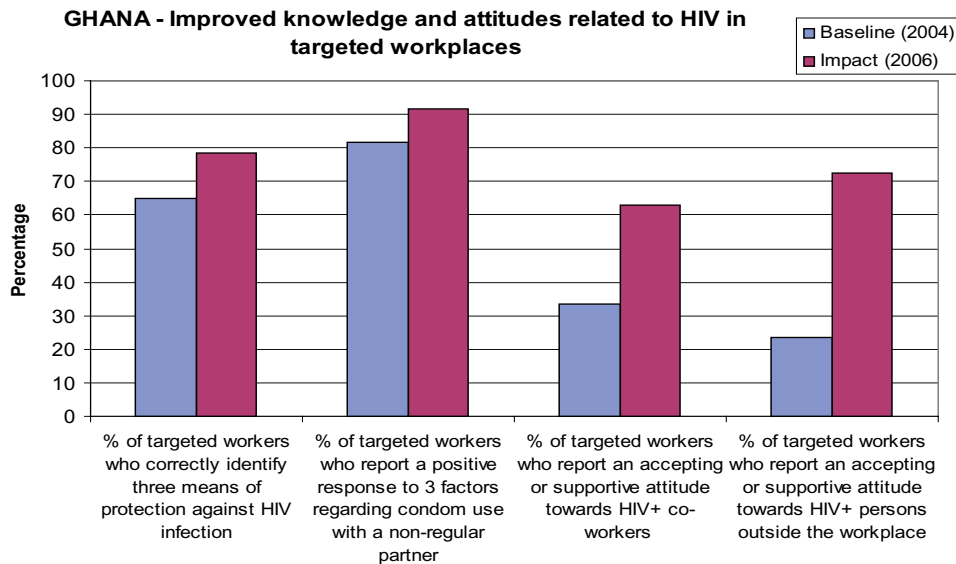
A network of focal points and peer educators now operates in 36 garage plots targeting garage workers and other small businesses such as food vendors. The main aim is to raise workers’ awareness of their own risk of contracting HIV, including an understanding of the connection between alcohol, multiple partners, casual sex and infection. The peer educators work early in the morning and in the evenings, when people have more time to talk, and they have so far covered about 2000 workers. Many also take HIV education into their churches and local communities.

“In the past we could barely raise the issue of safer sex, condom use and VCT with our apprentices and workers because we felt uncomfortable,” explains Mr John K. Nimo, Acting National Secretary for the GNAG. “We believe the ILO programme has raised awareness of the risk involved and now people know they must look out for each other.”

Impact of workplace interventions

Launched in 2003, the ILO SHARE project (Strategic HIV/AIDS Responses in Enterprises) gave high priority to creating an enabling environment at national level. The project team helped to set up a vibrant, energetic programme with 13 enterprises reaching 4,000 workers in four economic sectors - mining, agriculture, the public sector and the informal economy.

Initial worker surveys showed that while awareness of HIV was high, there were many misunderstandings and misconceptions about personal risk and transmission. Stigma and discrimination related to HIV were high.



Using this information, the project helped enterprises to develop specific strategies and materials targeting different groups of employees, and trained over an hundred peer educators to implement workplace HIV behaviour change programmes.

In September 2006 the ILO carried out an exit survey and compared this with the main findings of its earlier baseline study to measure the impact of the project. It found that the implementation of workplace services and policies coupled with awareness-raising activities had resulted in significant changes. There were major improvements in understanding of modes of transmission and means of protection, particularly among women. The survey also found improved attitudes towards people living with HIV, a marked reduction in high-risk behaviour and a significant increase in condom use.

The Odawna programme's success has convinced government and other donors that this approach can make a significant difference in the informal economy. As a result the Council For Indigenous Businesses Association (CIBA) has developed the Ghana Informal Sector Workplace Policy on HIV/AIDS based largely on the Odawna Garages programme. To push the agenda forward, an Informal Economy and HIV/AIDS Steering Committee has been formed to: approve operational plans; suggest ways to increase involvement of member associations in HIV prevention, care and support activities; find ways to integrate with the national response to HIV; and mobilize resources.

Financial support has already been forthcoming from UNAIDS and the UN Implementation Support Plan (UNISP) for a limited scale-up of the Odawna garages programme.

In spite of the ending of the ILO-USDOL project earlier in 2006, the ILO's HIV/AIDS Focal Point in Ghana is working closely with national partners to ensure continuity of workplace interventions. These include the employers' and workers' organizations, government ministries, departments and agencies, and the Ghana Business Coalition (a tripartite private sector network). The Ministry of Manpower Youth and Employment and the Ministry of Local Government are particularly key in the workplace response. The ILO's technical assistance is provided to empower employers' and workers' organizations as well as the public sector to participate actively in the national response.

Within the local government structure, the ILO has assisted the development of HIV/ AIDS policies at district level which have been mainstreamed into operational plans. Workplace HIV programmes have had such a positive impact that the workplace has been prioritized as one of the key intervention areas for Round 8 in the Ghana proposal which has been approved by the Global Fund to fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria.

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