

How post offices are working to stamp out HIV and AIDS

The international community marks World AIDS Day again this Wednesday. It is almost thirty years since AIDS, caused by the Human Immuno-deficiency Virus (HIV) first began to have a devastating effect on individual lives, workplaces and societies. Currently, about 33 million people are living with the virus globally. There are another 7,500 new cases of infection every single day. Workplaces can play a key role in the HIV response according to the first international labour standard on HIV and AIDS adopted by the ILO last June. Andrew Bibby, a London-based journalist, reports for ILO Online.

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The ILO's Recommendation 200, approved by an overwhelming majority of the world's governments, employers' and workers' organizations at this year's International Labour Conference, provides a new tool in the global fight against the virus. The [Recommendation concerning HIV and AIDS and the world of work](#) is the first international labour standard focussing on human rights explicitly on HIV and AIDS in the context of work. It operates on the basis that HIV/AIDS is a workplace issue, not simply because it affects the workforce but also because the workplace can play a vital role in limiting the spread and effects of the epidemic.

This principle is being put firmly in practice in a highly innovative programme being coordinated jointly by the ILO, UNAIDS, the Universal Postal Union and UNI Global Union, which makes use of the key role which post offices and postal workers play in their communities. Brazil, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, China, Estonia, Mali and Nigeria have already been using their post office networks to communicate basic health information and preventative advice about HIV/AIDS, and the idea is now being extended to post offices in other countries.

For Assane Diop, Executive Director of the ILO's Social Protection Sector, the initiative makes enormous sense. "The campaign is creatively using the opportunities of the postal network and its structure in each country to raise awareness of HIV/AIDS, and to counter stigma and discrimination," he says. His view is echoed by Edouard Dayan, Director General of the UPU: "With 600,000 post offices around the world, the postal network is a natural partner for this HIV prevention awareness campaign. It is the single largest health-awareness initiative ever launched globally by the postal sector, demonstrating the huge outreach and value of the universal service that it provides," he says.

The campaign was launched in Brazil in February this year, just in time for the Carnival period. More than 12,000 post offices have been displaying leaflets and posters, and around 800,000 letters with HIV prevention advice have been delivered to households in three pilot areas of the country. The posters and leaflets carry the slogan *The post offices are fighting against AIDS. What about you? Protect yourself: use a condom.* A dedicated website at www.correioscontraaids.org.br was also established for the campaign.

In Nigeria, Nigeria Post (NIPOST) focused first on raising awareness among its own employees through training workshops designed specifically for counter staff and managers. These employees were then encouraged to cascade the information down both to other NIPOST employees and to the public using the post office network. To launch the campaign, ceremonies were held in different parts of the country with employees wearing colourful T-shirts bearing the slogan *NIPOST cares, protect yourself.* "The Post is now seen as a carrier of health information, not just mail," says Maayen Ujong, NIPOST's Director of Operations.

In neighbouring Cameroon, postal workers have also been given a particularly key role to play in the success of the campaign. CAMPOST launched their campaign in July last year, putting employee communication at the heart of their effort. Campaign coordinators visited post offices to liaise with local staff and to deliver the visual materials. CAMPOST estimates that more than 36,000 people visit the country's post offices each day and are therefore being made aware of the message of the campaign.

The four partner organisations behind the campaign are now developing the second phase of the initiative, which focuses less on general public awareness and more on raising HIV awareness specifically among postal employees rather than the general public. The postal and logistics sector is a major source of employment worldwide, with five and a half million people working for the main national postal operators, and a further 2.5 million working for private, informal and courier services. Among postal operators who are developing good practice is the South African Post Office, which has launched a booklet, the *Employee Guide to understanding HIV and AIDS* and which has pioneered voluntary HIV testing and counselling for its staff.

Initiatives such as these, as well as the active participation of UNI Global Union which represents postal workers, reflect the spirit behind ILO Recommendation 200 which stresses the value of social

dialogue. A successful HIV/AIDS policy and programme needs cooperation and trust between employers, workers and governments, the Recommendation advises.

The ILO Recommendation, adopted in June 2010, builds upon and reinforces the principles of the ILO [Code of Practice on HIV/AIDS and the world of work](#), developed in 2001. The ILO code as well as Recommendation 200 are available on the ILO website at www.ilo.org/aids. A more specialist ILO publication, providing guidance on establishing workplace policies on HIV/AIDS, entitled *Guidelines on HIV and AIDS for the postal sector*, is under preparation and will be launched shortly.