



Independent observer
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AFRAVIH 2024 in Yaoundé, behind the curtain: a look back at the pre-conference moments

Introduction

The International Francophone Conference on HIV, Hepatitis, Sexual Health and Emerging Infections (AFRAVIH) marked a historic milestone by being held for the first time in sub-Saharan Africa. From April 16 to 19, 2024, Yaoundé, the capital of Cameroon, played host to this major international event, which follows in the footsteps of conferences dedicated to the fight against HIV/AIDS (International AIDS Society (IAS), International Conference on AIDS and STIs in Africa (ICASA), etc.).

This 12th edition was much more than a simple scientific meeting; it was also a moment of activist and community mobilization. In fact, several pre-conferences and meetings were organized in the run-up to the conference, testifying to the strong commitment of French-speaking people and activists involved in the struggle against HIV.

In this article, we look back at some of the key moments of this mobilization and offer summaries of three major pre-conference activities, including a press conference on peer education certification, a workshop on the mental health of sexual and gender minorities, and a workshop on the participation of communities

and key populations in national coordinating bodies (CCBs) for Global Fund grants at the Djeuga Palace on April 15, 2024.

Peer Educators

Bringing together a number of key players and stakeholders, a press conference highlighted the issues surrounding the certification of the peer educator profession. Aimed at sensitizing both national and international opinion, the meeting resulted in some decisive positions being taken.

At the heart of the discussions was the essential role of peer education in the struggle against epidemics. Indeed, they are at the forefront of informing, educating and supporting the most vulnerable communities affected by HIV/AIDS. However, despite their proven importance, these professionals in the field face difficulties in carrying out their missions.

The panel explored in depth the challenges and opportunities associated with peer education certification. Key players such as Florentin Ateba, former peer educator at Humanity First Plus Cameroon, Deme Papa Abdoulaye, Advocacy Officer and Head of the Africa Office at Coalition PLUS, Brice Bambara, Advocacy and Civil Society Specialist at the Global Fund, and Mach-houd Kouton, Regional Advisor at the UNAIDS Office for West and Central Africa, presented their different perspectives to the twenty or so media representatives present.

Recommendations

Integration of peer educators into the health pyramid was strongly emphasized, as was the need for close collaboration with community-based organizations (CBOs) and universities to establish a training curriculum leading to certification. In addition, the definition of a reference framework for intervention and the guarantee of an adequate social protection system were identified as steps towards full recognition of the professional status of peer educators.

These recommendations were widely reported in the national and international media, testifying to the urgency and relevance of the debates launched at this pre-conference. Media covering the event included [Afrique En Éveil](#), [Camer Press Agency](#), [Kamer Info Plus](#), including [online](#) media, etc.

Mental Health of Sexual and Gender Minorities

Organized by the Global Alliance of Communities for Health and Human Rights ([AGCS PLUS](#)) this pre-

conference served as a platform to raise awareness and mobilize stakeholders in the fight against HIV, hepatitis, sexually transmitted infections and emerging infections about the specific mental health challenges faced by these often-marginalized populations.

One of the key points of this meeting was to highlight the close link between the criminalization of key populations and the achievement of [UNAIDS' 10/10/10](#) targets. Indeed, stigma and discrimination exacerbate mental health problems, undermining efforts to end HIV/AIDS by 2030. Poignant testimonies highlighted how psychological barriers can hinder not only HIV prevention and treatment, but also access to mental health services. In addition, AGCS PLUS presented the results of a preliminary assessment organized to take stock of the mental health needs and services of sexual and gender minorities in Burkina Faso, Guinea Conakry and Côte d'Ivoire in West Africa.

The active participation of some fifty representatives from several French-speaking countries illustrates the importance attached to mental health and the collective will to integrate it into the minimum package of activities reserved for key populations.

Recommendations

Intra-community stigmatization

- Organize intra-community conversations to raise awareness among community members about different gender identities and gender expression, as well as the importance of inclusion and mutual respect.
- Encourage solidarity and empathy within our community by organizing activities that contribute to positive exchanges and the creation of links between members.
- Promote actions within organizations that strongly condemn any act of discrimination or stigmatization, and encourage awareness of internal prejudices.

Accessibility/acceptability of service offerings

- Set up collaborative frameworks with care providers (psychologists and psychiatrists) for the provision of community-friendly services to reduce discrimination in mental health and wellness care.
- Establish safe and secure community support spaces where LGBTI people can share their mental health experiences and concerns, without fear of judgment or discrimination.

Contextualization and inclusiveness in service provision

- Approach mental health and well-being from a global perspective, taking into account social, cultural, economic and political dimensions. A holistic approach will enable us to better respond to the specific needs of sexual and gender minorities in Africa.
- Involve local communities in the development and implementation of mental health and well-being services. Take into account their needs, concerns and suggestions.
- Ensure that mental health and well-being services are accessible to all, without discrimination.
- Carry out studies on the mental health and well-being of sexual and gender minorities to better understand the issues and specific needs.

RISE Study

A workshop on the results of the RISE study brought together 43 participants from National Coordination Bodies (NCBs) and civil society from Gabon (Central Africa), Côte d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad (Western Africa) and France.

The study "[Representation, Inclusion, Sustainability, and Equity in Country CCMs and Global Fund Grants](#)" (RISE) conducted jointly by [Coalition PLUS](#), [amfAR](#), [AIDES](#), [O'Neill Institute of Georgetown University](#) and a collective of frontline community organizations [1], aimed to assess and promote representativeness, inclusion, sustainability and equity within CCMs and Global Fund grants. Its aim is to strengthen the voice and decision-making power of communities most affected by HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria. [You can read more on the RISE Study [here](#)].

At the end of the workshop, participants drew up a declaration highlighting the needs, challenges and aspirations of community representatives and key francophone populations within CCMs, while proposing relevant recommendations at several levels of intervention.

Recommendations

Specific recommendations were made to the Global Fund Secretariat, technical partners and CCMs worldwide to strengthen transparency, community participation and inclusion, while ensuring the autonomy and capacity of community representatives to contribute effectively to decision-making processes.

These recommendations include measures such as strengthening awareness-raising strategies, ensuring adequate training for community representatives, promoting mechanisms for community oversight of grants, and establishing peer support and mentoring networks.

The RISE workshop and declaration are an important step in promoting community participation and accountability in the fight against HIV/AIDS. These recommendations provide a valuable framework for strengthening inclusive and equitable governance mechanisms to ensure sustainable results.

Reference

[1] In addition to the four lead organizations, the RISE Steering Committee embodies the representativeness of the entire global CCM community and expertise, and is made up of:

- Ishtar MSM: representative of key populations including MSM, CCM Kenya
- Malaysian AIDS Council (MAC): representative of key populations including transgender people, CCM Malaysia
- Movimento para o Acesso ao Tratamento em Moçambique (MATRAM): representative of people living with HIV and tuberculosis, CCM Mozambique
- POSITIVE-GENERATION: representative of people living with tuberculosis and experts in malaria, CCM Cameroon
- REVS PLUS: Sponsor of the RIPOSTE project, which aims to strengthen community participation in CCMs in Burkina Faso, Burundi and Mauritius.
- Sisters Foundation: representative of key populations including transgender people, CCM Thailand
- Treatment Action Campaign: representative of women living with HIV, CCM South Africa
- Uganda Young Positives: representative of young people living with HIV, CCM Uganda

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