

# HIV Prevention and Control Beyond the Workplace: The Role of the Private Sector in Zimbabwe

Z. Machekanyanga, F. Mpofu\*, Masvikenii\*\*,  
N.Z. Nyazema\*\*\* and J. Sithole

*National AIDS Council*

*\*Kingdom Financial Holdings*

*\*\*National Blood Transfusion Services*

*\*\*\*Econet Wireless Holdings*

*Harare, Zimbabwe*

## Summary

The private sector in Zimbabwe has a crucial role to play in achieving sufficient economic growth, if it takes the issue of HIV/AIDS on board, as part of its business strategy. This it can do, by going beyond the workplace in combating the spread of HIV in the community where the work force comes from. There is need for a coordinated effort through something like a business coalition, hence the establishment of a Zimbabwe Business Council on HIV/AIDS under the auspices of the National AIDS Council.

## Issues

If the current prevailing political situation were not there, the private sector in Zimbabwe has a crucial role to play in achieving sufficient economic growth, to raise the standard of living. It would be the major source of employment, creator of wealth and supplier of food, clothing and most essential goods and services. Unfortunately, the private sector has also been feeling the impact of HIV/AIDS for quite some time now without publicly acknowledging it. Given the prevalence rate of HIV in Zimbabwe of 25-30%, it is reasonable to assume that businesses in Zimbabwe that have more than 10 employees have already seen at least one employee die of HIV/AIDS. A study carried out by the Zimbabwe AIDS Prevention

Project (ZAPP) in 1996, showed that about 20% of the male workforce in Harare was HIV positive and, that sero-conversion rate was 3% (Bassett, 1996; Mbizvo, 1996). This has been the only study so far. There is, therefore, little published information quantifying the impact on many companies. However, there is no doubt that a lot of these companies have some information on HIV/AIDS for their in-house purposes. Increasingly, publicly owned businesses in their annual reports to shareholders, are now being urged to include the impact of HIV/AIDS on their work force. Absenteeism, the largest element of HIV/AIDS-related costs, is increasing because of the ill health experienced by employees. Many workers in Zimbabwe take time off to care for their families and for funerals. In spite of all that, many companies should have easily accessible data on AIDS costs related to employee benefits, such as group life insurance, pensions, funeral benefits and medical aid, analysed using models that have now been developed (Whiteside and Sunter, 2000). A lot these companies have communities in their neighbourhood that now need more support to weather the crisis.

Time has come to encourage the private sector in Zimbabwe, to go beyond their workplaces and, to be actively involved in the on prevention of the spread of HIV in the community. It is known and has come to be accepted that the business of business is business and, that it is not the job of business to be involved in HIV/AIDS awareness campaigns. Private sector has been involved do far through its contribution to the national AIDS Fund, levy managed by the National AIDS Council (NAC). Clearly this is not enough. The different players in the private sector still need to get involved actively through, for example, advocacy of issues that may have synergy with their business.

The starting point would be to identify the key elements of an anti-HIV/AIDS programme and see who is most competent to do what. For example, the hospitality industry through its hotel and restaurant association, could take on nutrition and HIV/AIDS. The advertising industry could help in creating a campaign that connects with children in primary and secondary schools, the future workforce, in conjunction with the Ministry of Education.

Programmes designed would show the planned HIV/AIDS activities are not just about lives to be saved but the businesses. So far, too often companies have jumped feet first, thinking that a one-off event such as a World AIDS Day, a donation function or even the distribution of condoms at the workplace will be adequate. Corporate Zimbabwe needs to pull together and identify gaps in the manner in which the National HIV/AIDS Strategy is being executed and, to stand up and be counted in its efforts to combat the spread of HIV in our communities. Businesses if they are to succeed financially they require a steady supply of skilled labour which come from the community.

## **Description**

Using the success of the peer education programme at the workplace and the rapport that has been created with business leaders, it was decided to establish a business council on HIV/AIDS in Zimbabwe. NAC initially approached a few individual business leaders who had taken initiatives to have HIV/AIDS policies in their companies. A concept paper on the idea of a business council was drawn up. The paper was then subsequently developed into an invitation letter sent to CEOs of 73 companies listed on the Zimbabwe Stock Exchange and those listed in other different companies directories that the team could lay its hands on. The letter indicated that one of the objectives of the proposed council would be;

- To foster strategic partnerships against HIV/AIDS between the private sector and other actors in the national response to HIV/AIDS.

Accompanying the letter was a questionnaire, which asked questions, for example related to;

- Size of the company in terms of workforce
- Company broad health policy
- The company HIV/AIDS policy and its response so far to the epidemic
- Awareness and knowledge of any government tax relief strategy
- The company social responsibility programme

Business organizations were then later invited to a breakfast meeting, sponsored by the UNAIDS office in Zimbabwe. The concept on the need to set up the coalition was presented to those present, who were representing their companies. A working committee was formed whose task was to identify areas in national HIV/AIDS policy document that could be adopted by the different private sector companies.

## **Lessons Learnt**

There were enthusiastic responses from the CEOs or someone delegated, to the letter from companies in mining, banking, tourism and telecommunication, whose total market capitalization is US\$ . The average number of employees per company was 300 (range 100 – 2000). All companies indicated that the council was long over due and gave some suggestions for the best way forward.

From the responses to the questionnaire, unfortunately, it appeared that less than 20% had an explicit HIV/AIDS policy and none of them were aware that HIV/AIDS at the workplace had a multitude of legal implications. Many firms, almost 80%, had prevention programmes whose thrust was mainly awareness and peer education. These had been initiated either the Zimbabwe AIDS Prevention Programme (ZAPP) or Zimbabwe AIDS Prevention and Support Organization (ZAPSO). The mining sector was in the lead followed by the agricultural sector through its commercial farmers union. None of the companies that claimed to have HIV/AIDS

programmes had any information on the impact of HIV/AIDS on their businesses i.e the bottom line. In other words no company has quantified the impact of AIDS by evaluating productivity losses; understanding the effect on manpower costs; determining the effect on employee benefits and lastly choosing a strategy.

All of the companies in Zimbabwe indicated that they had a budget line for community responsibility, mainly for charity and some tax relief. It was clear, therefore, that the majority of them seemed to be failing in their duty to undertake significant prevention programmes or mitigating the impact of HIV/AIDS at the community level i.e. understanding that HIV/AIDS was a public health crisis and a threat to their client base.

Some businesses leaders who had misunderstood what was being proposed met the concept of a Zimbabwe Business Council on AIDS (ZBCA) with some resistance initially. Each company was to continue running with its own programmes. They felt satisfied and happy with the way they were doing things. Others felt they could not see how their businesses gained mileage from ZBCA and that they could not disclose how AIDS had affected their bottom line. What this told us was that these companies did not appreciate how AIDS beyond the workplace, was affecting their client base.

## **Conclusions**

HIV/AIDS in Zimbabwe is such a public health crisis that it is already defining how the society will develop over next few decades. Companies in Zimbabwe should be looking at what AIDS means to them by making a careful quantitative assessment of the additional costs incurred in maintaining a productive workforce. This requires collection of a large amount of data and significant investment in the analysis, to be subsequently made public. If things do not look good employees must be told or the top management will have to seek to avert such a catastrophe by formulating a new strategic plan.

Once ZBCA is up and running relentless effort has to be made to make the private sector accept their social responsibility by coming up with a coordinated effort to fight the spread of HIV. ZBCA has to encourage companies that at the very minimum, there should be a company policy on HIV/AIDS covering prevention, care and nondiscrimination. The policy should also include practical management strategies, workplace principles and programme. Companies in Zimbabwe should also have mission statements on AIDS which include the community in its response.

This has to be done in partnership with other stakeholders including the government of Zimbabwe which should be in a position to provide, for example, tax breaks for any company that has an effective AIDS programme. ZBCA will provide the forum where government and business share best practices among themselves in terms of prevention and treatment

programmes. This will be one of the ways that will assist the private sector to avoid providing different levels of care depending on the value of the employee to the company. Companies should not be seen to be prepared to look after all its employees with the latest therapies which the other people in community do not have access to.

ZBCA will also facilitate the appreciation of the fact the way in which employees with HIV/AIDS are treated in the workplace has a multitude of legal implications. These legal implications extend from the highest level, the Constitution of Zimbabwe, right the way down to a shop-floor agreement between employer and employees, the farm manager and farm workers etc. The council will bring to the attention of the business community other pieces of legislation and policies in Zimbabwe not directly related to employment, which have impact on the management of HIV/AIDS in the community. Businesses in Zimbabwe, if they wish to remain competitive globally, have to go beyond the workplace with issues related to HIV/AIDS.

## References

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