Mobilizing ICT against HIV/AIDS: Ghana

**Implementing Institution:**
Foresight Generation Club

**Head:**
Roderick Manu Amoah

**Details of Institution:**
*Address:* Foresight Generation Club, P.O. Box Bt 702, Community 2, Tema, Ghana

*Tel.:* (+233) 2447 83056, 2220 5150
*Fax.:* (+233) 2221 1404
*E-mail:* albertobeng@yahoo.com

**Implementation Period:**
The project was initiated in February 2002 and is ongoing.
HIV/AIDS is widespread in sub-Saharan Africa. In Ghana alone, some 350,000 people are infected with the disease and more than 30,000 people have died from it. Ignorance concerning the way the disease is transmitted leads to many of these people being excluded from society and even ostracized by their families.

To counter these misunderstandings and tackle the spread of the HIV/AIDS virus requires a range of medical, sociological and educational initiatives. The Foresight Generation Club, established in 2002, uses new and increasingly available computer-based information and communication technologies (ICTs) to teach young people not only to become computer literate but also about the realities of HIV/AIDS. Working together in groups and using specially developed interactive software packages, some 3,000 Ghanaian youths, many of them young women, have received such training over the past three years.

Follow-up questionnaires confirm that the interactive teaching methods have brought about positive behavioural changes among those who have attended the ICT training courses. In addition, many young people have found employment in ICT-related businesses or, using their newly found expertise, have established their own Internet cafés and telecentres.

Over the next three years, the project aims to provide ICT training with imbedded HIV/AIDS awareness-raising sessions to some three million young people in Ghana.

### Costs:
To date, the project has cost some US$48,000, most of which has been donated by individuals, small collaborating organizations, youth groups and, more recently, the Global Junior Challenge, based in Rome, Italy.

### Summary
HIV/AIDS is widespread in sub-Saharan Africa. In Ghana alone, some 350,000 people are infected with the disease and more than 30,000 people have died from it. Ignorance concerning the way the disease is transmitted leads to many of these people being excluded from society and even ostracized by their families.

To counter these misunderstandings and tackle the spread of the HIV/AIDS virus requires a range of medical, sociological and educational initiatives. The Foresight Generation Club, established in 2002, uses new and increasingly available computer-based information and communication technologies (ICTs) to teach young people not only to become computer literate but also about the realities of HIV/AIDS. Working together in groups and using specially developed interactive software packages, some 3,000 Ghanaian youths, many of them young women, have received such training over the past three years.

Follow-up questionnaires confirm that the interactive teaching methods have brought about positive behavioural changes among those who have attended the ICT training courses. In addition, many young people have found employment in ICT-related businesses or, using their newly found expertise, have established their own Internet cafés and telecentres.

Over the next three years, the project aims to provide ICT training with imbedded HIV/AIDS awareness-raising sessions to some three million young people in Ghana.

### Background and Justification
Sub-Saharan Africa is home to 10 per cent of the world’s population but 60 per cent of those living with HIV/AIDS, accounting for some 25 million people. In Ghana, the disease affects 3.1 per cent of the adult population, or a total of 350,000 people. Antiretroviral drugs to treat HIV/AIDS patients are readily available in developed countries but are too expensive for widespread use in the South. In addition, there is widespread ignorance in many African societies concerning how the disease is spread. This ignorance leads to misunderstandings about the disease and its victims and has led to a stigma being attached to HIV/AIDS patients, which means that they are discriminated against in a variety...
of ways. Often HIV/AIDS patients are made redundant so that they lose the ability to provide for themselves and their families. In addition, they may be ostracized by their communities and perhaps even by their families.

Against this background, many national and international organizations have implemented HIV/AIDS awareness campaigns throughout sub-Saharan Africa. Studies carried out prior to this initiative, however, revealed that, even though understanding of HIV/AIDS had increased, many people had not changed their lifestyle practices and the disease was still spreading. Indeed, research carried out in Ghana has shown that the impact of such awareness campaigns is diminishing and there is a need for new, innovative approaches to get the message across.

Surveys carried out in Ghana revealed that more than 60 per cent of the target age group (15- to 45-year-olds) left school with a junior secondary education or less, whereas some 30 per cent were educated to the senior secondary school level. Perhaps because of this lack of general education, studies carried out in collaboration with a sister organization, Young African Achievers, showed that knowledge of ICTs was generally very poor in such countries as Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa. However, the same research highlighted a great interest, especially among young people, in learning more about the technology and its uses. This is possibly because many of these people who have received little education are now working in low-paid jobs or are unemployed. They also tend to lead promiscuous lifestyles, thus enhancing the spread of HIV/AIDS. However, the surveys also showed that well-educated people with relatively high standards of living were also interested in ICTs and the possibility of advancing their careers by improving their knowledge of the technology.

To tackle these dual issues – the continuing spread of HIV/AIDS and the desire among a generally uneducated population to learn more about ICTs – the project, “ICT for Development and a Strategic Tool in the Global Fight against HIV/AIDS and the Related Stigma”, was conceived. To design the programme, a group of industry ICT experts and other professionals, including staff of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working on HIV/AIDS, came together to establish the Foresight Generation Club in February 2002.

The project was conceived as a way to tackle computer and Internet illiteracy among young people and, in the process, provide information about HIV/AIDS, outlining its prevalence within the community, how it is transmitted (and, just as importantly, how it is not transmitted), and the steps that can be taken to protect oneself against infection. The initial location chosen for the implementation of the project was Tema, a small city in southeast Ghana not far from the capital, Accra.
The use of ICTs for problem-solving and improving living standards in developing countries cannot be overemphasized.

Realizing this and the fact that other HIV/AIDS education programmes had achieved only limited success, the Foresight Generation Club decided to embark on a strategy of providing free ICT training to people between the ages of 15 and 45 years. This target group was chosen not only because it is the most at risk of contracting HIV/AIDS but also because it comprises the majority of the workforce that must remain healthy in order to keep the economies of poor countries running.

Conventional HIV/AIDS awareness programmes have used a combination of simple advertising-type messages and educational lectures focusing on, for example, the use of condoms and abstinence to restrict the spread of the disease. The innovative aspect of the Foresight Generation Club initiative was to infuse messages relating to HIV/AIDS into ICT training packages that are provided free of charge (fig. 1). In this way, not only are young people provided with the opportunity to become computer literate, thus acquiring skills that are useful for their own career prospects and for the wider development of the country, but their awareness of the disease and its attached stigma is also heightened. Indeed, data collected by the initiative show that many people who have attended the free courses were inspired by the multimedia presentations and animations and are currently pursuing careers relating to ICT.

**Figure 1 |** Ghanaian youths receiving ICT training.

This dual-use approach has advantages over many other programmes currently being implemented to tackle the HIV/AIDS crisis in sub-Saharan Africa as the interactive methods used mean that people learn more quickly and retain the information that they have acquired. Using ICTs in this way is also considered to be more cost-effective compared to other HIV/AIDS awareness programmes currently being carried out in developing economies. For example, many more people can be attracted to attending free ICT training courses than to a seminar or public lecture on HIV/AIDS.

The sharing of knowledge and experiences relating to the computer training courses and their associated HIV/AIDS awareness programmes is among the most important objectives of the project. To achieve this goal, local youths who have taken the courses have been assimilated into the project as additional trainers (as both interns and volunteers) so as
to ensure the continuity and sustainability of the initiative. The project is also collaborating with youth groups, community-based organizations (CBOs), telecentres and Internet cafés across the country and with schools in various communities to ensure that the project’s successes and experiences are shared with as many stakeholders as possible. In this regard and to further advance the outreach of the programme, support is being provided for specific schools, especially those in deprived areas, and targeted youth groups, for example those who are not already computer literate.

Leaflets and ICT manuals with embedded HIV/AIDS awareness messages, together with multimedia presentations on the history of the disease, have been prepared. These interactive materials include the real-life stories of some infected people and statistics about the spread of HIV/AIDS, information about signs and symptoms, and encouragement to go for regular voluntary check-ups.

There is also awareness that many ICT programmes have a gender imbalance in favour of males. The Foresight Generation Club, therefore, has made it a deliberate policy to try to achieve 60-per cent participation of girls and women in its courses. The project has already trained a significant number of females in ICT applications, Internet usage and HIV/AIDS awareness programmes alongside their male counterparts.

Funds for expanding the project, however, continue to be in short supply and requests to external sources for assistance have generally not been successful. However, the project is now established in ten regional centres in Ghana, including the regions of Ashanti, Brong Ahafo and Greater Accra, using local telecentres as partners. As many of these areas are poor, rural areas, costs have been kept to a minimum by agreeing with the telecentre owners to hold courses during off-peak hours. Efforts are also made, especially in rural areas, to avoid holding courses during those times when a great deal of labour is required on the local farms. Indeed, particularly in areas where Internet access is limited, the project is now using radio programmes to expand its outreach efforts. Programmes have been developed targeting females and youths that are broadcast mainly in the evenings so as to reach as wide an audience as possible.

Throughout the implementation of the project, strong emphasis has been placed on monitoring and evaluation. The results have been very encouraging. Starting with the youth from various suburbs of Tema in Ghana, where the project was first implemented, the responses to questionnaires, including testimonials from persons living with questionnaire respondents, have revealed that there have been greater behavioural changes among those who have undertaken the training courses. Feedback from such questionnaires and surveys also allows the training programme to be upgraded and improved as the project continues.
PARTNERSHIPS

Owing to the fact that funding for the project has been limited, the Foresight Generation Club has relied heavily on the human and material resources of various partners and collaborating organizations. Among these are the various telecentres and Internet cafés in the areas where the project has been operating, including the Araba Memorial Internet Café, the Browsenet Centre, the Community 2 Business Centre, the Degaab Internet Centre, the Talita Telecentre, the Tiwaa Telecentre, the Ultimate Star Computer Centre, Aggrey Road Junior Secondary School, the Good Shepherd School, Tema Secondary School, Sakumono Youngsters Club, Sakumono Pentecost Youth, Estate Pentecost Youth and many others representing the whole of Ghana.

Project managers are also currently holding discussions with organizations in Belgium, Cameroon, Italy and Kenya concerning potential collaboration and partnerships.

REPLICABILITY

There is a strong interest in ICTs in Africa and a strong desire to close the digital divide and to catch up with more developed countries. This desire is especially entrenched in the youth who are hoping that, by learning to use ICTs, they can improve their living standards. Indeed, the rapidly increasing access to comput-

ers and the Internet across sub-Saharan Africa means that the HIV/AIDS awareness-raising mediated by ICT training courses can now be easily replicated throughout the continent. However, project members have also realized that some prospective catchment areas are very remote and that people there have very little chance of accessing telecentres. In these cases, the aim is to enter into partnership with local radio stations to help to inform and update rural people. In fact, training sessions, even those provided over the airwaves, need not necessarily focus on HIV/AIDS awareness-raising but could be tailored to educate people about modern farming practices, for instance.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Many political leaders in Africa have either confirmed their interest in developing their country’s ICT infrastructure or have actually committed themselves to doing so. Rwanda and South Africa are two cases in point. Indeed, associating the twin goals of ICT training and HIV/AIDS awareness-raising should provide African leaders with the necessary leverage to obtain funds from international donor agencies and development partners.

LESSONS LEARNED

Initially, the idea of using ICTs in the fight against HIV/AIDS and the related
stigma faced opposition from those who considered that the project would fail without adequate financial resources and logistical support. Critics also considered that the practice of using volunteers and interns other than salaried staff would hinder the success of the project. However, thanks to the dedication of those involved, the programme has been successful despite the limited budget.

Among the other lessons learned during the implementation of the programme are the following:

- there is a requirement to employ at least two permanent resource persons, a project officer and a director in order for the project to achieve the maximum impact;
- programme officers must be motivated and that this is best achieved by awarding certificates that recognize their achievements and ensuring that interns are paid and that staff are provided with a satisfactory salary;
- resources must be used wisely in order to cut costs but without compromising on the service provided and the effectiveness of the training; and
- the use of volunteers and interns should be encouraged.

**IMPACT**

To date, more than 3,000 youths in Ghana have been trained in the use of various ICT tools and Internet application skills (fig. 2), thus equipping them with skills required by employers. In addition, many young people have been provided with work experience through the project’s internship and volunteer programmes. Furthermore, a significant number of girls and women have also benefited from the free ICT and Internet training programmes. Indeed, it has been noticed that in the internship and volunteer programmes, both females and males developed ICT and Internet usage skills equally and girls and women were not sidelined in any way.

**Figure 2 |** Some of the youths who have received training through the HIV/AIDS awareness/ICT courses provided by the Foresight Generation Club.

As a side effect of the project and the ICT skills now present in many communities, many Internet cafés and telecentres have now opened in the targeted communities, thereby creating employment. Such Internet cafés also provide people with access to the World Wide Web, an increasingly useful source of information on a wide variety of issues, including those relating to development, health and even further ICT training.
With regard to the HIV/AIDS awareness-raising component of the initiative, as hoped, there has been a measurable positive change in the sexual behaviour of the course participants concerning the disease and its associated stigma. These results have been hailed by both national and international agencies.

The project’s implementation methodology and practices have also been praised by the World Bank and a certificate of participation in the World Bank 2005 Essay Competition has been awarded. Other international recognition has come from the Switzerland-based Initiatives of Change, which invited a project employee to work as an ICT intern in its offices in Montreux, an opportunity that greatly benefited the project.

The project will be highlighted in a publication by ActionAid Africa that is being supported by 12 African governments and the Department for International Development (DFID) of the Government of the United Kingdom and the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) as part of the International Partnership against AIDS Programme that is being replicated in the 12 participating countries.

**Future Plans**

Within the next three years, the “ICT for Development and a Strategic Tool in the Global Fight against HIV/AIDS and the Related Stigma” project has the ambitious goal of training three million Ghanaian youths. Among this total will be a greater proportion of girls and women than have received training under the first phases of the implementation of the project. More community and youth groups will be targeted in various catchment areas in efforts to increase general computer literacy in the country.

Despite the efforts of the project, however, the fight against HIV/AIDS in Africa also requires a greater number of trained health workers. Therefore, the Foresight Generation Club is seeking to collaborate with existing health institutions and health-care professionals in order to mobilize them to take part in information dissemination and educational exercises.

Concerning the ICT training courses, they are currently conducted with three people sharing each computer. In future courses, the aim is to provide one computer for each participant within the next three years. Courses are also conducted using rented LCD projectors and laptop computers. Although this equipment has proved effective in getting messages across to course participants, it is expensive. The Foresight Generation Club, therefore, intends to purchase its own projector and laptop as well as a digital camera in order to reduce future expenses.

There is also an aim to provide certificates to those participants who successfully complete the course and to have the certificates formally recognized and accepted not only in Ghana but also in other countries where the training programme may be replicated.
As part of the project’s efforts to reduce the stigma of HIV/AIDS, some future courses will also include participants with HIV/AIDS. It is hoped that they will talk freely and openly about their predicament and that the other participants will make them feel welcome. HIV/AIDS-infected people will also be invited to give lectures about their predicament as a further measure to try to reduce the stigma attached to the disease.

Finally, the project aims to establish its own telecentre in an effort to eliminate the expense of using commercial telecentres for courses and, as it will be run as a commercial venture, to provide a source of revenue for the project and help to make it sustainable in the long term.

**Publications**

**Case Study Prepared by:**
Albert Yeboah Obeng  
*Address:* P.O. Box Sk 554, Cop  
Sakumono Main, Tema, Ghana  
*Tel.:* (+233) 2447 83056  
*E-mail:* albertobeng@yahoo.com