

Humphrey Nabimanya



Take HIV/AIDS conversation out of the classrooms, halls

Uganda has made tremendous strides towards creating awareness about HIV/AIDS spearheaded by the Government and other stakeholders. As a result, we have seen the statistics of HIV/AIDS prevalence rates reduce. Right now, Uganda is among the top countries in the world with the lowest number of children born with HIV through mother-to-child transmission (MTCT). Uganda is down from having 28,000 HIV infected babies in 2011 to 3,500 in 2016 and has been ranked among the top countries in the world to have the greatest leap towards elimination of MTCT.

However, this does not call for celebration and merrymaking. It only provokes us to devise new and innovative ways on how we can completely wipe out HIV/AIDS in the country. If, for example, we are to achieve the ambitious 90-90-90 strategy by UNAIDS that calls for 90% of all people living with HIV knowing their HIV status, 90% of all people with diagnosed HIV infection receiving sustained antiretroviral therapy and 90% of all people receiving antiretroviral therapy having viral suppression by 2020.

Even then, Uganda still registers 230 HIV new infections a day, something that was highlighted at the end of a UNAIDS Global Review Mission to Uganda, which held multi stakeholder consultations in Uganda on February 21 – 23.

The mission further noted that despite the widely available anti-retroviral therapy, 76 people die of AIDS-related causes every day! This illustrates the urgent unfinished business of ending AIDS, made more worrisome by recent calls to reduce the health and education budgets, that are important sectors for the fight against HIV, which at this critical time, do not augur well for ending the epidemic.

And this still affects young people, especially girls aged between 15 and 24, are disproportionately affected by HIV infection. Among adolescent girls; every hour, two young women are getting infected with HIV in Uganda. The prevalence of HIV among adolescent girls stands at 9.1%, compared to the national prevalence rate of 7.3%. The question now is; what new strategies can we employ to make the above prevalence rates history or mitigate the effects of this deadly scourge?

HIV education is one of the most important tools for raising HIV awareness. But, that doesn't mean you have to be in a classroom to be a part of the fight against HIV. There are plenty of ways to raise HIV awareness in communities.

For example, use of newer forms of information communication technology (e.g. Internet use whether through a computer or mobile phone, SMS, smartphone apps) has grown exponentially over the last few years. In Uganda, there are 13,023,114 people connected to the internet translating into 31.3% of the total population, according to the Uganda Communications Commission. The use of information and communications technologies (ICT) complements other Information Education and Communications (IEC) campaigns designed to reach the youth. Ministry of Health and UNFPA Uganda have launched www.thezone.ug to provide such information and services. They are equally using the internet to promote access to information and services on sexual reproductive health and rights.

Thought about music and sports as a tool? UNESCO is implementing Protect the Goal campaign in Karamoja that is greatly transforming HIV/AIDS awareness through tournaments that are being used to gather young people and when the games are on, information and services on HIV/AIDS are being passed on to them. On the other hand, music being an important part of popular culture especially among young people, therefore, becomes a great platform for discussions on social behaviour change issues. Concerts also become particularly effective.

For such HIV and other SRHR messages to take root, they must be accepted by large numbers of youth, and individuals are more likely to accept these messages if they are relatable to their context. HIV remains a multi-sectoral development issue that continues to impact Uganda's economic growth. If Uganda is to harness the demographic dividend, the youth must be healthy.

The writer is the founder and team leader of the Reach A Hand Uganda