



Strengthening Communities to Fight HIV/AIDS

Due to a host of cultural factors, as well as factors related to political marginalization, the Maasai remain some of the most vulnerable people to HIV/AIDS in Sub-Saharan Africa. Among the Maasai in Longido, Tanzania, Sauti Moja is conducting a project entitled, Community Conversations, which arises from the research conducted in Longido by Sauti Moja's Africa Program Manager, Corey Wright, in 2003. It includes a unique methodology originally developed by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). Corey became a certified trainer in this methodology in Zambia in 2005. In cooperation with its partner agency, LOOCIP, Sauti Moja is accompanying communities through a multi-stage process of learning, action, and change. Through the use of numerous participatory tools that stimulate reflection and dialogue, Sauti Moja is helping the community understand the nature of the AIDS epidemic and identify the factors that are contributing to its spread. Sauti Moja will continue to support the community, as they prioritize the most important issues, create plans, and take action.

Through fostering community dialogue, planning and community action, Sauti Moja hopes to surpass the typical HIV/AIDS initiatives that tend to be individual-focused and treat people as “objects of change” rather than as “agents of change”.



Corey Wright is shown with LOOCIP staff member, Elifadhili Ngeresa (far left) and Sauti Moja volunteers, Penina Ngayok and Neema Edward. Elifadhili, Penina and Neema are three of the twenty local leaders (men and women) and youth who have been trained in the theory and practical application of Community Conversation methodology, since November 2006. These trained individuals have become the backbone of the project, taking on the leadership and responsibility to conduct community meetings where communities discuss HIV/AIDS, plan strategies to address the epidemic, and initiate actions that ensure the survival of their community. A recent focus has been local strategies for care of people living with AIDS.

“This project will be different. It won't be simply another workshop, another seminar. It won't abandon us. It will walk with us, hand in hand, as we fight the epidemic”.

The Community Conversations methodology focuses on stimulating dialogue between males and females that brings women and girls' vulnerability to the forefront of the community's prevention planning. For example, in one meeting, some women triggered a heated discussion by stating that women and girls' lack of access to economic resources increases their vulnerability to HIV/AIDS. They said that, out of desperation to meet their needs and their children, women and girls sometimes accept sexual propositions in return for economic support. Although the male participants initially rejected this notion, they conceded their position after listening to the perspectives and experiences of the female participants! The meeting concluded with a commitment to addressing this issue in the planning and action stage.

