

# Sharing African responses to HIV/AIDS

*The HIV/AIDS and Local Government Learning Network (Halogen) met in September to focus on local government responses in southern and east Africa. The aim was to share experiences and good practices, strengthening the role of municipalities in contributing to effective local level responses to the myriad development and governance challenges posed by HIV/AIDS.*

*The opportunity to hear from and share with colleagues coming from diverse contexts, yet united by a common challenge, was both inspiring and enriching. After the event, email contact kept the conversation going, testimony that in a challenging field, such as responding to HIV/AIDS, networking is extremely valuable.*

## Confronting the challenge

Among the participants were representatives of local government in Zambia, Botswana, Malawi, Tanzania, Namibia and South Africa, with national government representatives from Lesotho, Namibia, Malawi and South Africa, representatives of organised local government associations, SALGA from South Africa, BALA from Botswana and MALGA from Malawi, networks such as the Alliance of Mayors and Municipal Leaders on HIV/AIDS in Africa (AMICCAALL) and the United Cities and Local Governments of Africa (UCLGA), non-governmental organisations, including from Zimbabwe, academics and advisors from German Technical Cooperation (GTZ), which has support programmes in a number of the participating countries and also supports Halogen through the Strengthening Local Governance Programme in South Africa.

The HIV/AIDS challenge is massive - of the 2.7 million newly infected people in 2008 nearly 60% (1.5 million) were in southern and eastern Africa. The nine countries with the highest HIV prevalence worldwide are all located in southern Africa. There's also a strong urban bias; 29% of the HIV epidemic in the region is concentrated in 15 major cities.

Researcher with Wits University, Jo Vearey, says municipalities are faced with the challenge of engaging through an 'inter-sectoral approach that encompasses healthy governance and public health advocacy, with municipalities mobilising actors within other spheres of government and civil society to take action to address the plethora of health and development challenges associated with HIV'. The implication for municipal leadership and those tasked with direct management and co-ordination of the response is that, increasingly, they are going to have to reach far beyond their own organisations, which requires building a strong set of relationships, networks and links.

The wider international community can and does contribute to the development and implementation of appropriate policy initiatives to improve health at a local level within southern and eastern Africa, and supports programmes and research to address local responses to HIV and improve health equity.

Central to discussions was the concept of 'mainstreaming', which is often understood in widely differing ways. The challenge is to mainstream HIV/AIDS internally within the municipality and in the way it delivers services to communities. Mainstreaming programmes must be clearly defined and monitored to have the most impact, while departments and programmes must speak to one another to prevent parallel programmes, duplication, fragmentation and potential wasted resources.

On a broader level, municipalities need to link with national strategic plans and frameworks, and explore the potential role of local government. There is also a gap for municipal strategic plans around HIV/AIDS, which would clearly identify the mandate of municipalities given that the process of decentralisation and developing local government continues across the region.

Ideally, data collected on a country basis should be disaggregated to municipal level to assist with planning and implementing specific programmes aimed at prevention and at assisting people infected with and affected by HIV/AIDS.

## Why networking is important

Detailed presentations about the responses to HIV/AIDS by local government within the different country contexts stimulated debate and showed the value of knowledge sharing. Everyone recognised the need to continue networking, because despite differences in context and mandates, all municipalities are engaged in development.

Some ideas about how to share knowledge and experiences include:

- Reporting back on the Halogen event to colleagues within their own organisations, with other municipalities and government departments, and especially within forums of organised local government.
- Recognition of the wealth of information to be gained through visiting relevant websites, collecting information and passing it on via existing newsletters and other communication channels.
- Exploring how social networking tools, such as Facebook, can be used to keep people in touch, despite the distances and disparate contexts.

## ABOUT THE HIV/AIDS AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT LEARNING NETWORK (HALOGEN)

Halogen brings together researchers, organisations and municipal practitioners to share knowledge, skills and learning on HIV/AIDS and local government in South Africa.

For more information, or to join Halogen, see [www.halogen.org.za](http://www.halogen.org.za) or call (021) 683 7903.

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