

SPOTLIGHT ON

SPRING 2014

# GRASSROOTS

*Stephen Lewis Foundation: How we work*



## Why support community-based organizations?

Community-based organizations (CBOs) have always been at the heart of the response to the AIDS pandemic in Africa. That's why the Stephen Lewis Foundation (SLF) decided, from its inception in 2003, to invest at community level, where small grassroots groups were already restoring lives and hope. These were the people, overwhelmingly women, living in the world's most affected communities and moving urgently to deal with the ravages of AIDS. They were holding funerals, helping people die with dignity, supporting families of bereaved and traumatized orphaned children, urging people to get tested, providing counselling, and breaking through

stigma and isolation. And it was the community leaders who were the first to identify gender inequality as the driver of the pandemic.

Meanwhile, the international community was still trying to figure out whether or not to give money, what their policies should be, or just starting to collect statistics. In the face of a pandemic unparalleled in human history, the Foundation had its own intuitive response—simply fund the work of the community-based organizations. Outraged at the egregiously slow pace of the international response, it was time to galvanize support and get money directly to the groups implementing programmes for people in desperate need, right at the frontlines of the apocalypse.

Over the years what we've come to realize is that our initial response had more potential than we first knew. Groups who work at the community level take a holistic approach, because they understand that resurrecting lives rent asunder by AIDS requires a human response at every level, and attention to the full range of economic, social, emotional and physical needs of the community. This plays out in vitally important ways. The organizations adapt quickly and knowledgeably to an ever-changing landscape. For instance: a project may start out paying school fees for orphaned children, but soon realizes that children need food so that they can concentrate on their studies and walk all the way to school. Hence, a feeding programme begins. Soon it becomes clear that these traumatized children need grief counselling, and so psychosocial support is introduced. And as the children mature, they need more education about sex, HIV and protection in order to break the cycle of another generation lost to AIDS.

At the same time, the organizations begin to identify the central role of grandmothers who are caring for these youngsters, many of them under one roof. They too desperately need emotional support, parenting support, income-generating programmes and help with nutrition. It's a whole new dimension of critical engagement and the Foundation partners with the CBOs so that we can move with them as they grow, evolve and expand their programmatic and geographical reach.

The Foundation is actually supporting communities to heal themselves, so a high level of mutual respect, consideration, flexibility and long-term commitment has to be firmly in place. It's why we don't have 'exit strategies.' Just when an organization reaches the point where it can go to scale is the moment when funding is needed more than ever to ensure the sustainability of the work. As Theo Sowa—CEO of the



Alexis MacDonald/SLF

*A young woman from the Kulich Youth Reproductive Health & Development Organization (KYRHDO) reading her poem about HIV and AIDS at an International Women's Day march in Ethiopia.*

African Women's Development Fund—captures so accurately, there are organizations who you continue to walk alongside because your values and principles are aligned. That certainty and continuity means everything in the context of the pandemic—fraught as it is with crisis, loss, and struggle for people in the community and the staff of these grassroots groups themselves.

Ongoing support from the Foundation has allowed CBOs to make a lasting difference for their communities. What starts out as a small group of HIV positive women determined to support one another, soon turns into a network of women working with hundreds of people in the community—raising

awareness, eradicating stigma, starting income-generating projects, and providing life-sustaining counselling and live-saving access to medicine.

### **Selecting partners for impact**

The SLF has learned an enormous amount from funding and working with 300+ partners in its first decade. Early on we realized that identifying the right partners was impossible without visiting them first. Some proposals that we receive are bureaucratically perfect, while others may simply be a couple of handwritten pages, but with very compelling content about the needs of the community. When you visit them you often find that the

more sophisticated proposal comes from a good organization. The less polished proposal reveals an outstanding organization that is the heartbeat of its community, working with child-headed households where no one else is present, or reaching an entire community of grandmothers raising countless orphaned grandchildren. So we don't rely solely on what's on paper.

We have developed a healthy set of criteria that assist us in identifying organizations that are rooted in and accountable to their community. We look for organizations that have women and people living with HIV and AIDS on their boards and on their staff, and that have a gender-based focus to their programming. We have also learned from our partners that counselling and emotional support to deal with trauma in the family, the community, and amongst those who do the work is an essential ingredient to the success of every project.

Ultimately, though, it's about more than a checklist of criteria. It's the demonstration of community care, conviction, expertise and accountability that's so compelling. These grassroots organizations are filled with people (often HIV positive women) who took the initiative in their communities because they just couldn't stand what was happening. Many left their nursing or government jobs, left their salaries and pensions, and plunged into the work of providing services and succour to their struggling communities. All of them share passionate beliefs about what must change so that, in their own words, no woman dies without community around her and no grandmother is left to struggle to raise orphaned children alone. It's the passion and care that exists when it's your own brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, and children who are at the epicentre of the devastation of AIDS.

*Continued on back...*



Alvix MacDonald/SIF

Women trained as paralegals by the Rwanda Women Network (RWN) perform a dramatization of their community outreach work.

## Implementing our approach

The Foundation's philosophy has always been firmly rooted in the notion that the expertise needed to turn the tide of HIV and AIDS in Africa is found at the community level, and that it is grassroots organizations that are keeping communities together, and resurrecting peoples' hopes and resilience.

### Partnerships

we work directly with groups that are of, by and for their communities, and include women and people living with HIV and AIDS on their boards and staff.

### Holistic approach

because the multiple traumas inflicted by the pandemic must be addressed together to rebuild lives, we support a broad range of responses to address physical, social, economic and emotional well-being.

### Due diligence from the outset

before we decide to support an initiative, we visit every partner to evaluate its capacity, the strength of its connection to the community, and its accountability systems.

### Collaboration

we maintain close contact with our partners, via regular communication and field visits, to facilitate relationships of trust and openness.

### Flexibility and continuity

there is no end yet to the pandemic, and the context continues to change. We accompany our partners as their work grows and deepens, and they respond to new and emerging challenges.

## Power and partnership

Community-based organizations are a stabilizing presence for their community members in an environment of crisis. They are often stretched thin and distressed by the work and their staff often contend with AIDS-related challenges themselves. The Foundation understands that these groups are at the epicentre of the crisis, and that at any moment the rug can be pulled out from under them for one reason or another.

Because of this the SLF puts a very strong emphasis on relationship-building. This is not just about cultivating friendship. It's about how you set up a dynamic that allows you to learn what's actually happening in a real way—when things go wrong, when things go right, when something unexpected happens. It's about creating a way of working that facilitates trust and honesty. It's about developing a way of *really* working together rather than acting out a pantomime of partnership. You can't pretend that there is no power dynamic, because unavoidably there is. One "partner" should not have the prerogative of defunding the other. Since its inception the Foundation has worked hard to become more informed and responsive. In finding a way forward with grassroots groups, we've arrived at an effective and mutually accountable way of working together. It's a hybrid—a fusion of the donor/recipient relationship and that of a political ally. And it brings about life-changing results.

The Stephen Lewis Foundation works with community-level organizations which are turning the tide of HIV/AIDS in Africa by providing care and support to women, orphaned children, grandmothers and people living with HIV and AIDS. Since 2003, we have funded over 1100 initiatives, partnering with 300 community-based organizations in 15 of the African countries hardest hit by the pandemic, and we have disbursed and committed over \$75 million to programme spending.



We are consistently moved by the solidarity and passionate commitment of our supporters.

**Please donate now.**

[stephenlewisfoundation.org/donate](http://stephenlewisfoundation.org/donate)

Thank you



Tel: 416-533-9292 · Fax: 416-850-4910  
Toll-free: 1-888-203-9990  
info@stephenlewisfoundation.org  
www.stephenlewisfoundation.org

Publication Mail Agreement # 41002516

**Return undeliverable Canadian addresses to:**

260 Spadina Ave., Suite 501  
Toronto, Ontario, M5T 2E4, Canada