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## Frontier Internship in Mission

### **Assessing the impact of HIV/AIDS in West Africa**



*By Bernard Tietcheu*

THE WEST AFRICA REGION is held up as a good example of regional integration. Its 260 million inhabitants are served by the collective leadership, economic and political of the Economic Organization of West African States (ECOWAS), which ensures the free movement of goods and persons across the region and joins most major West African cities via roading infrastructure. In the decade up to 2005, the West African countries of Mali, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Benin and Senegal have seen positive economic development (averaging 4% annual growth) and have enjoyed relatively stable and peaceful political environments under the direction of sound democratic institutions.

#### **Long lasting conflicts**

Despite the peace in parts of the region, several factors have undermined stability for all the nations of West Africa. These factors include armed conflicts, drug trafficking and large-scale migration. West Africa is today considered the largest drugs transit hub in Africa, a reality which endangers the security and development of the whole region. The freedom of movement offered by the region's economic and political co-operation means that people move not only by compulsion due to wars and political instability in some parts of the region, but also to seek more rewarding jobs and better educational opportunities.

Three West African countries have suffered from serious conflicts during the last decade. These armed conflicts have caused large-scale social upheaval, loss of lives and destruction of property in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Côte d'Ivoire. They have crippled

the economies, forced migration, destroyed livelihoods and the environment and have been the source of brutal violence, particularly against women and children including forced recruitment of child soldiers, child trafficking, rape and sexual abuse.

FIM intern Bertrand Tietcheu (Cameroon) has reported on the major impact of armed conflict on the spread of HIV/AIDS in the region, confirmed through his research in 2007.

“During all the workshops and consultations that I have contributed to, both at national and regional levels, it has transpired that violent conflicts play an important role in the spreading of HIV in Africa. Conflict first weakens the states and the institutions, then creates conditions for the violation of human rights and atrocious sexual violence against women and children”, he said. Bertrand’s internship has seen him conduct research and resourcing work with the West Africa Regional Office of the Ecumenical HIV/AIDS Initiative in Africa (EHAIA), located in Accra, Ghana.

The EHAIA ecumenical HIV/AIDS initiative was set up by the World Council of Churches (WCC) in 2001 following a “Global Consultation on the Ecumenical Response to the challenges of HIV /AIDS in Africa” and works to achieve the plan of action from that consultation. The EHAIA plan envisions a transformed and life-giving church, embodying and proclaiming abundance of life, and empowered to meet the many challenges posed by preventing the spread and responding to the impact of the HIV virus in Africa.

### **The HIV/AIDS pandemic in the region**

Despite being less affected than other parts of the continent, West Africa has relatively high levels of HIV infection, which have grown dramatically since the first reported cases appeared in 1985 in Côte d’Ivoire. The West African countries with the lowest HIV infection rates are Chad, Niger, Mali and Mauritania and those with the highest are Burkina Faso, Côte d’Ivoire and Nigeria. The main driver of infection in the region is commercial sex. In the Ghanaian capital Accra for example, 80% of HIV infections in young men had been acquired from female sex workers. In Niger, the adult national HIV prevalence was 1% in 2003, yet surveys of sex workers in different regions found an HIV infection rate of between 9 and 38%.

Despite a 2004 survey showing a slight drop in infection rates, Ghanaian officials remain concerned by big regional differences in infection rates and increasing signs of unprotected sex among youths. High HIV and syphilis infection rates among young Ghanaians suggest that increasing numbers of young people are engaging in unprotected sex. The 2004 survey showed that the 15-29 age group recorded a slight increase of 0.1% reaching a 4.5% HIV infection rate, which indicates either high sexual activity or very little impact of prevention methods on the 15-29 age group.

Over 160,000 children in Ghana have been orphaned by HIV/AIDS. These children often lack appropriate care and education and as such are more vulnerable to involvement in drug taking, crime and prostitution. The AIDS related deaths of young adults in their productive years is also set to affect Ghana’s overall economic performance in agriculture, commerce and industry in the coming years. The virus has dramatically affected labor in West Africa in general, as the vast majority of people living with HIV/AIDS are between the ages of 15 and 49 —in the prime of their

working lives. Currently social institutions such as schools, factories and hospitals are regularly forced to train replacement staff for those who have become too ill to work.

### **Faith-based communities role in the struggle against HIV/AIDS**

In this context, research has shown that religious organizations and faith-based communities can play an important role in the struggle against the pandemic, particularly by promoting the behavioral changes needed to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS. While previously the issue of HIV/AIDS and discussions about sexuality have been remote and unacceptable in the church context, churches have recently begun to develop HIV/AIDS prevention programs that include sexual education, training of community education volunteers and fostering pastoral care for people living with HIV/AIDS.

### **Changing youth behavior**

A primary objective of the EHAIA internship was to assess the impact of HIV/AIDS on young people in Ghana particularly and in West Africa in general. The internship's secondary goal was to determine how young people are economically affected by the impact of HIV/AIDS in Ghana and West Africa. This goal focused on analyzing economic, political, cultural and religious factors that may influence the behavioral patterns of young people in the context of HIV/AIDS and discerning how to translate that research into significant behavioral change, notably the sexual behavior of young people.

“EHAIA has always considered young people as key players in the HIV and AIDS response in Africa, and has always allocated resources to empower them so that they can effectively play their role. Youth leadership is therefore at the centre of its activities across Africa”, said Bertrand.

The FIM internship research undertaken in 2006 helped to identify factors that must be considered when addressing the issue of HIV in Ghana. The findings of that research were further discussed and explored during the Regional Youth Meeting held in July of 2007 in Togo. The Togo meeting took the theme of “Prevention of HIV infection and behavior change”. Participants were led in a process of analysis to identify the various causes of HIV infection amongst people in West Africa, while also looking at broader related issues such as human sexuality, youth sexual behavior, sexual violence and HIV infection linked to drug abuse. The meeting addressed the problem of orphans and vulnerable children and the role of communities in prevention of behaviors that lead to HIV/AIDS infection. The meeting set up a working group whose function was to establish an EHAIA West African Youth Network, to co-ordinate and support both regional and national projects on HIV/AIDS destigmatization and prevention amongst youth.

### **HIV /AIDS in post-conflict situations**

In post-conflict situations, the issue of repatriation and resettling of refugees is a huge challenge, as the case of Liberia readily demonstrates. The Liberian war has been one of the most devastating in West Africa, claiming many human lives and displacing thousands. Tragically, the abuse and social degradation that occurred during the conflict have strongly contributed to the spread of HIV/AIDS in the country. Alongside population displacement many aspects of the conflict have had a particularly devastating impact on women and children, including the breakdown of relationships;

the use of rape as a weapon and the rise of sexual coercion in exchange for money, food or protection. The war also led to the collapse of the country's health systems, with the resulting breakdown in access to information, declining safety in blood transfusions and an absence of medical supplies, all of which lead to increased exposure to HIV.

Bertrand Tietcheu's project included work in the Buduburam Refugee Camp, a camp set up for Liberian refugees by the Ghanaian government in co-operation with the UNHCR. Once the armed conflict ended and the new Liberian government was elected, there was a program of repatriation organized in cooperation with the UNCHR. However, many of those who were able to leave returned to Ghana because there were still no jobs for them in Liberia.

"Today the UNHCR and most aid agencies have pulled out, but we still have a community of about thirty thousand people (taking refuge) wrote Bertrand. The refugees are vulnerable and exposed to drug abuse, crime and sexual exploitation, particularly young girls. During the year I did some study visits there and with partner organizations we organized talks where we raised the issue of prostitution, promiscuity, drugs and narcotics, alcoholism and HIV and AIDS."

Bertrand's receiving community has been the Student Christian Movement of Cameroon, which is affiliated to the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF) and its Africa region. In September, the WSCF Africa Region met in Ghana and launched a program called "HIV and AIDS Economic Justice Platform of Action". The program's focus is to demonstrate how African economies have suffered from structural adjustment policies under the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. The WSCF Africa region platform describes how the resulting economic pressure has contributed to poverty and underdevelopment and hastened the spread of HIV/AIDS.

As a direct consequence of structural adjustment, African states have been seriously undermined and become incapable of providing basic health care and social welfare to their citizens. Through this project, the WSCF has set out to establish an effective economic justice advocacy framework for national movements to address the HIV/AIDS pandemic and economic injustice issues.

"Several Student Christian Movements from West and Central Africa attended the meeting. Each of them formulated a draft plan of action for their advocacy work in their respective countries. Being part of the gathering I had the opportunity to exchange views and perspectives on that issue." said Bertrand.

As a key part of his research and advocacy this year, Bertrand attended the 2007 World Social Forum (WSF) in Kenya and contributed to the international "Ecumenical Platform". The WSF addressed a number of issues including climate change, democratic governance, leadership, HIV and AIDS, human rights, water, gender equity, conflicts, poverty and social inequalities.

### **A new focus for the future**

Concluding his internship, Bertrand's re-entry project with the Student Christian Movement of Cameroon will focus on three main areas:

- i) Peace, conflict and human rights education

- ii) Health, HIV/AIDS and human sexuality, and
- iii) Employment and youth socio-economic integration.

Bertrand will approach these issues paying close attention to the gender and intergenerational factors that influence each area.

“We will be focusing on advocacy, policy and governance evaluation and monitoring. The goal is to help the Student Christian Movement and other ecumenical and secular youth organizations to become key players in social transformation”, he said. Bertrand’s work with Cameroon SCM will coincide with the All African Conference of Churches process towards its General Assembly, to be held in Maputo, Mozambique in 2008 and with the WSCF Africa regional program on HIV/AIDS and economic justice advocacy work. He will help SCM Cameroon to utilize links with Cameroon’s National AIDS Commission, Commission on Human Rights and Freedom, Youth for Human Rights International, Transparency International - Cameroon, Global Youth Coalition on AIDS (GYCA), the Global Youth Action Network (GYAN) and further UN agencies dealing with his focus issues.