

**A REPORT OF THE 14TH INTERNATIONAL
CONFERENCE ON HIV/AIDS AND
SEXUALLY TRANSMITTED
INFECTIONS IN AFRICA
(ICASA)**

**PARLIAMENT
OF KENYA
LIBRARY**

HELD IN ABUJA, NIGERIA

FROM 4TH TO 12TH DECEMBER, 2005

**PRESENTED TO KENYA
NATIONAL ASSEMBLY**

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	PAGE
1.0 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	2
2.0 BACKGROUND.....	3
3.0 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY.....	5
4.0 OPENING CEREMONY.....	6
4.1. ISSUES ADDRESSED DURING THE CONFERENCE...	8
5.0 RECOMMENDATIONS.....	11
6.0 CONCLUSION.....	12

1.0 ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We, Ms. Grace Mwakio and Ms. Anne Njoroge, would like to thank the Clerk of the National Assembly and the AIDS Control Unit Head, Mr. P.C. Omolo, for according us an opportunity to attend the 14th ICASA Conference which was held in Abuja, Nigeria from December 4th - 12th, 2005.

We would also like to thank Heads of our respective departments, i.e. Library and Hansard, for giving us time off from our busy schedules.

2.0 BACKGROUND

The 14th International Conference on HIV/AIDS and Sexually Transmitted Infections in Africa (ICASA) opened on December 5th, 2005 in Abuja, Nigeria. The ICASA, a leading forum for the discussion of HIV developments and trends on the African Continent, is organized by the Society for AIDS in Africa (SAA). Its purpose is to bring together African scientists, social leaders, political leaders and communities to share their experiences and discuss current trends in the management of HIV/AIDS and Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) from an African perspective. ICASA was founded in 1986 by a group of African scientists and it is held every two years.

The conference theme “HIV/AIDS and the Family” was aimed at focusing on how families in Africa would be better empowered and involved to respond comprehensively to the AIDS pandemic in Africa. This theme was chosen to explore traditional Africa family values; to emphasize respect, love, care and support for those infected and affected by HIV/AIDS; to promote prevention within and outside the family; to discuss gender issues and to explore factors which promote vulnerability to HIV infection within families.

The theme was divided into seven areas namely:-

- (i) Accountability, politics and policies in HIV/AIDS – initiatives fulfilled and unfulfilled;
- (ii) Prevention and control – The way forward;
- (iii) Treatment, care and support;

- (iv) Science and the community – Bridging gap; Human rights, gender and ethics;
- (v) HIV/AIDS, the youth, children and the family;
- (vi) Impact and impact mitigation.

3.0 **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

At the 14th International Conference on HIV/AIDS and Sexually Transmitted Infections (ICASA) which took place between December 4th and 12th in Abuja, Nigeria, a wide range of issues on HIV/AIDS were discussed.

The following salient points briefly summarise the lessons learnt, observations and recommendations made from the conference:-

- (i) There is urgent need for care and support for orphans and vulnerable children to be considered as an integral part of national and international response to the HIV/AIDS crisis.
- (ii) There is need to build the capacity of partners, including in and out of school youth clubs, to implement programmes that encourage young people to adopt responsible sexual behaviour.
- (iii) The family as a unit is important in reaching children on sex and sexuality issues.
- (iv) There is need to invest more in research and control of HIV/AIDS as a prerequisite to the establishment of sustainable human development.
- (v) Innovative legislations must be in place to cope with the issues of stigma, discrimination, security, dignity and free or fair or affordable access to Medicare, education and empowerment of the infected and affected.

4.0 OPENING CEREMONY

Speaking at the Opening Ceremony, UNAIDS Executive Director, Dr. Peter Piot, underlined the priority to ensure that funds are available to those who need it. It was noted that with more than 3.5 million people living with HIV/AIDS, Nigeria today ranks third in the world after India and South Africa. Among the most affected are children and young people. About 90 per cent of the children become infected through Mother-to-Child Transmission (MTCT) mode and 50 per cent do not survive their second birthday because they do not have access to treatment.

Also, President Olusegun Obasanjo, represented by Secretary to Government of the Federation, Chief Ufot Ekacte, said government's establishment of the National AIDS Council (NACS) provided opportunities for civil society, women groups, youth organizations and faith-based organizations to contribute in the fight against the infection.

While thanking the Global Fund for HIV/AIDS and the United States government for their support, President Obasanjo pleaded that emphasis should be shifted to the non-infected population to continually inform them of the risks of infection.

The President also challenged the conference to follow up on the promise made by the G-8 Countries to provide universal access to anti-retroviral drugs by 2010.

The President went further to list the gains of the Government response to HIV/AIDS pandemic in the past three years, which included increased awareness, reduction in

stigmatization and discrimination to the extent that there now exists over 350 support groups for people living with HIV/AIDS as well as behavioural change by the segments in society most at risk.

4.1 ISSUES ADDRESSED DURING THE CONFERENCE

- ❖ Delegates to the 14th ICASA Conference said that while the family should be a strong unit in the fight against HIV/AIDS, it was being undermined.
- ❖ It was noted that the family has been made fragile in Africa because of poverty and HIV/AIDS. Interventions focus on treating individuals and ignore the cornerstone of African society; the family.
- ❖ In poor families, when two parents had difficulty in making ends meet, the death of even one parent from AIDS places an intolerable economic strain on the household.
- ❖ Girls with little education who find themselves catapulted into the role of head of household may have no option other than turning to prostitution to support their brothers and sisters thus putting themselves at risk of being infected if they are not already.
- ❖ The Minister for Health, Botswana, said that every woman should have access to medication to free them and their children from infection. She further noted that this required a strong political will to be able to confront issues of HIV/AIDS in the African Continent.
- ❖ Women must have equal access to prevention education and the means of educating themselves, equal access to treatment and care and the right to protect their children from HIV infection among other issues.

- ❖ The conference also heard that even though the technology to prevent Mother-to-Child Transmission exists, the necessary measures can only be implemented if pregnant women attend ante-natal consultations. Such consultations are unheard of in large swathes of rural sub-Saharan Africa.
- ❖ On the issue of the impact of HIV/AIDS on children, Deputy Executive Director of UNICEF, Dr. Rima Salah, noted that while children were the central part of every family, they are clearly not at the centre of the international HIV/AIDS response. She noted that only a tiny fraction of infected children is receiving treatment and may die before even reaching their first birthday.
- ❖ . Delegates at the conference were divided over the issue of abstinence from sex as a way to stem the tide of HIV transmission in the world. The debate over the relevance of promoting abstinence only among population generally regarded as high risk triggered a hot argument among delegates, which included religious leaders and AIDS activists. One of the outspoken proponents of the abstinence only stance, Ms Winnie Mandela, argued that the only way to safeguard African children was to tell them to keep off sex before marriage. But Nobel Prize Laureate, Prof. Wole Soyinka disagreed with Mandela saying it is important to be realistic and try not to be hypocritical. 'Nature is sometimes very difficult to restrain, 'said Wole Soyinka.
- ❖ It was noted that in Africa, children and adolescents are accessing sex and sexuality information from the internet and other mass media and most of the time they are accessing sexuality information secretly and without

guidance from parents or other appropriate adult sources. This is in contrast to the traditional society in Africa, where communication on sexuality involved the extended family.

- ❖ At the conference, issues of treatment dominated some panel discussions. People Living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHAS) who attended the conference from across the world demanded for free treatment for people living with the virus.
- ❖ Also present at the conference was world renowned scientist and co-discoverer of HIV as cause of AIDS, Prof. Robert Gallo. He stated that there was no hope yet in sight for another landmark discovery of vaccine that would cure AIDS, much as the scientists are trying. He noted that all that existed currently on prototype HIV vaccines are progress reports and no breakthroughs.

5.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

- Delegates agreed that while the future is bleak, there are medical and technological innovations that can be capitalized on to improve the situation.
- Family as a unit is still important in reaching children on sex and sexuality issues.
- There is need to concentrate and focus social research on the methods that ought to be used to influence positive behaviour change with a view to discarding some harmful cultural practices which tend to promote the spread of HIV/AIDS pandemic.
- Support scaling up of comprehensive prevention of Mother-to-Child services that include care, treatment and support to women and their partners, as well as universal VCT for pregnant women and youth.
- The strategy of advocating through networked groups of young people should be adopted and used as an effective tool for helping to bring about an improved HIV/AIDS policy environment.

6.0 **CONCLUSION**

The ICASA 2005 conference brought up many issues that would continue to generate attention in the months to come. ICASA President, Prof. Fermi Soyinka, said the conference was successful despite the funding gap that existed initially. He further said the quality of presentations at all the sessions was high and hoped that lessons learnt would help in reducing the impact of the pandemic.