

APSA at the International AIDS Conference 2006, Toronto, Canada

From August 8 to August 19, the APSA Sexual Health Programme participated in the International AIDS Conference 2006 (IAC-2006) and two of its pre-conferences in Toronto, Canada. CORDAID, our main programme sponsor, invited us to share our experiences as a 'best example' pioneering project on sexual health promotion for teenage street and slum children. Below, a short impression by the programme manager Mr. Meindert Schaap.

Armed with the IAC-2006 programme schedule – at least three times as thick and heavy as the Bangalore Telephone Directory, I boarded the August 7, 22-hour flight to Toronto to join more than 25,000 (!) other participants from all over the world for twelve days of innumerable plenary sessions, workshops and ad-hoc protests and gatherings. A great opportunity to meet, discuss with, and learn from a vibrant mixture of people from all walks of life. To mention some of the attendees: president Bill Clinton, thousands of grassroots NGO staff from all over the six continents, movie-star Richard Gere, Indian government officials as well as groups of Hijras from India, Bill and Melinda Gates, many, many people living with HIV and AIDS, officials from the United Nations, commercial sex workers, etcetera, etcetera...

Two main objectives guided my presence at the Toronto conferences. First of all, I was invited to give both a presentation and a workshop based on the work that we are doing in APSA. On day two of the conferences therefore, I gave an intensive presentation to the invited partner-NGOs of four Dutch donor agencies on “HIV and (Street) Youth; Do’s and Don’t-s”, a presentation on the importance of truly welcoming and open-minded personal attitudes and high-quality interpersonal skills in working on HIV-prevention issues with at-risk teenagers.

The next day, in the international pre-conference of the Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance, I conducted a two-hour workshop on “Effective HIV-Prevention in At-Risk Youth / Street Children” for church leaders and faith-based organisations. In this workshop I contrasted the realities of the lives of teenage street children and their sexual behaviours with our own adult norms and values. Following this confronting introduction, heated discussions took place on the usefulness of the AB(C)-mantra [Abstain from sexual activity before marriage – Be faithful to only one partner within marriage – and, only if you *really* cannot stick to these two (...), then use Condoms (but again, please only after marriage)]. Through this workshop many participants realized that messages like ‘abstain’ and ‘be faithful’ have little meaning in the (sexual) lives of most teenage street children, and thus may not be the most effective messages to use. Together we formulated alternative, more effective approaches.

My second objective was to actively participate in a lot of sessions and workshops of the IAC-2006, and further learn about street children and HIV/AIDS. During the IAC however, it quickly became clear to me that there is extremely little attention for the situation of street children in the entire present-day HIV/AIDS discourse. Even in this huge international conference there were no / hardly any sessions, workshops or poster presentations in which street children were mentioned. I realized that street children seem to be a rather forgotten population when it comes to HIV and AIDS.

On the second day of the IAC I therefore decided to become very active in advocating for street children’s rights to sexual health. In all the sessions and workshops that I attended during the rest of the conference, I took every opportunity to ask critical questions on why nobody seemed to be bothered much about street children, and I explained why street children should (re-)appear on the international AIDS agendas as soon as possible. As a result of these advocacy efforts, quite a number

of participants contacted me and shared that they had similar concerns on the situation of street children and HIV/AIDS. Together with the Consortium for Street Children (UK) we decided that, in the next one year, I will take the lead in writing a position paper on ‘Street Children and HIV/AIDS’. Using this paper we will strive to get ‘street children & sexual health / HIV-AIDS’ back onto the international agendas for AIDS and Children, and hope to ensure that the IAC-2008 in Mexico (a country with many street children’s issues) will pay much more explicit attention to this population.

To conclude, it was very inspiring to me to be part of these three conferences. I was especially happy with the amount of positive criticism voiced in many of the gatherings, with the roles that I could play, with the intense sense of international solidarity, and with the ideas for further action that I was able to take home from all the discussions. In a world where there are about 6,000 new HIV infections per day (250 every hour!) among young people aged 10-24, and where in Bangalore alone about 250-300 street and slum teenagers get newly infected with HIV every year, let me conclude with a line that a teenage slum girl once said to one of the speakers in the conference, the former Irish president Mrs. Mary Robinson: “let’s forget about ABC, let’s talk DEF: “Don’t Eliminate the Future”!

Let our youth count!

Mr. Meindert Schaap,
The APSA Sexual Health Programme for
Teenage Street and Slum Children,
Website: www.streetkids-SRH.org