

Gathering in Kenya explores eliminating HIV stigma through love and dialogue



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More than 120 religious and spiritual leaders, health workers and young people met on 7-8 February to focus on strengthening the fight against stigma in the HIV response in Kenya. They were joined by representatives from the Kenyan government, civil society organizations, networks of people living with HIV, and development partners for an event in Nairobi. The meeting, *“Faith on the Fast Track: Eliminating Sigma and Discrimination Through Love and Dialogue”* aimed to assess the impact of the Framework for Dialogue methodology which has been implemented in several countries since 2013. The event was organized by the International Network of Religious Leaders Living with or Personally Affected by HIV Kenya (INERELA+ Kenya) and the World Council of Churches - Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance (WCC-EAA), with the support of United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), among others.

“The Framework for Dialogue is a tool which emerged as an outcome of the High Level Religious Leaders Summit on HIV held in Netherlands in 2010 to support systematic, inclusive and sustained dialogue and collaboration between religious leaders and persons living with HIV at national levels,” explained Francesca Merico, WCC-EAA HIV Campaign coordinator. “It provides a platform for joint action.”

The framework has opened doors for people living with HIV to work with religious leaders, reflected Jackie Wambui, a member of the National Empowerment Network of Persons Living with HIV/AIDS in Kenya. “They now have a guidance on HIV response. I believe they will create a platform for adolescents and young people living with HIV to voice their concerns.”

The framework has also created a lot of excitement, and religious leaders are now showing interest in the HIV response, noted Abdalla Kamwana, member of the Supreme Council of Kenya Muslims and INERELA+ Kenya chairperson. “If we continue with the same tempo, we will achieve zero stigma and discrimination. The dialogues bring in people from diverse backgrounds, different religions and cultures and people at different levels of leadership in faith communities. This alone enriches the dialogues.”

The participants were introduced to the work carried out in Kenya under this framework. Following the first dialogue, which was held in Kenya in 2015, joint actions between the religious leaders and persons living with HIV were established. The actions, namely, breaking the silence about HIV stigma, facilitating dialogues at different levels within faith-based institutions, development partners and government institutions, and advocacy for safer and healthier living, formed interventions geared towards reducing HIV stigma and discrimination by faith leaders and networks of persons living with HIV who worked very closely with INERELA+ Kenya.

Following these interventions, Jane Ng’ang’a the Programme Officer of INERELA + Kenya noted that some of the achievements realized within two years of using the framework include Kenya faith sector response to HIV mainstreaming into the national response, dialogues started in five counties, religious leaders taking the front line in the fight against stigma and discrimination and members of congregations beginning to support the initiatives started. A major highlight in this work has been the engagement of men in the faith communities in the HIV response.

At a practical level, the participants were able to hear from young persons living with HIV who have benefitted from the interventions of the framework through INERELA + Kenya. “My life has been wonderful since I joined INERELA+ Kenya. I feel the church has embraced me for who I am. I have achieved more spiritually and I am proud of who I am,” said Brian.

A gallery walk, where eight interventions in the framework were showcased, provided insights on how the framework has been a game changer in the HIV response by faith communities in Kenya. Acknowledging this, a person living with HIV in the meeting noted that this was evident in the right language being used by all participants and presenters in reference to persons living with HIV in the meeting.

In a session aimed at introducing religious leaders to HIV testing, the participants were invited to join the WCC campaign “Leading by Example: Religious Leaders and HIV Testing”, which encourages members of the faith communities to lead by example through being tested. The meeting also provided an opportunity for participants to learn what the National AIDS Control Council of Kenya was doing, as well as understand the HIV policy environment in the country.

Participants participated in the impact assessment of the framework being conducted by WCC-EAA. "The exercise will contribute to assessing the impact of HIV response outcomes in the country," said Dr David Barstow, president of EMPACT Africa, and consultant with WCC-EAA.

More quotes from the consultation:

"Religious leaders are the first point of entry for people infected or affected by HIV. Their voice in the HIV response must be heard." Jantine Jacobi, UNAIDS Kenya director.

"The story of HIV response cannot be complete without the faith leaders playing their role." Rosemary Mburu, executive director of WACI Health.

"Until the last person lives with dignity, the work of religious leaders is not finished," Dr John Kitui, Christian Aid Kenya director.

[More than showing up to sing a song: Building understanding and joint action between people living with HIV and religious leaders](#)

[Religious leaders and HIV testing](#)

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