
Demanding Sexuality Education

The COSAS National AIDS Campaign

Critical Health

The Kagiso town hall was the venue for the COSAS National AIDS Campaign launch. Thousands of scholars thronged the hall. There were guest speakers from the ANC Women's League (ANCWL), the NPPHCN National AIDS Programme, Concerned Nurses Forum, a student nurse from the Bonaseledi Nursing College, and Macmillan Boleswa AIDS Awareness Programme. The launch was decided on at a national workshop of COSAS leaders, held jointly with the National AIDS Programme (NAP) of the National Progressive Primary Health Care Network (NPPHCN). The conveners of the launch intend building an AIDS awareness campaign on the principle of community participation in health care. They recognise the lack of sexuality education in schools to prevent teen pregnancies, rape and STDs, and, as a result of limited government intervention, they see the need for a comprehensive AIDS awareness programme to be targeted at youth. COSAS national organiser, David Serekwane, demonstrated the demand of a generation, in the era of AIDS, for sexuality education, when he said to the press, "We feel as a student body, it is our duty to educate our members on the subject of AIDS, since it is not part of our curriculum."

Addressing the launch, the COSAS national projects coordinator, Albert Mahlangu urged his fellow students to take AIDS seriously. This was reinforced by the chant, "One Round, One Condom". Thandi Modise of the ANCWL stressed that AIDS was as much a threat to black people's lives as De Klerk's regime and the violence of Inkatha. Mahlangu rejected the notion of anyone dying from being educated. "We must fight for the right to know about our bodies, our health, our sexuality. We must demand sex and health education in our schools. We do not want to die of AIDS because we are ignorant", he said. COSAS, he asserted, recognised the need to involve other student, teacher and community organisations in their campaign against AIDS. COSAS needs to train peer educators to teach their fellow students about health as well as AIDS and sexuality education. It was pointed out that, not only did they have to protect themselves, but that they had a role to play in helping protect the community as well.

Condoms and Concerns

Speeches at the launch indicated a variety of approaches to education about AIDS and sexuality. There were, however, remarks which sometimes raised eyebrows. The speaker from the Bonaseledi Nursing College, in her speech directed at young girls, made a comment challenging girls to be cautious in approaching relationships: "if he tells you he loves you and therefore wants sex to show his love, he's lying!" This was applauded by a loud cheer. However, the speech was marred by comments urging teenagers that, because most of them did not know what condoms looked like, they should not ask for them. Rather, girls should do other things like sports. Children should concentrate on their academic education instead, the speaker insisted. This speech, while sensitive to confronting peer pressure to sex and encouraging youth to delay sex before completing their education, raised a number of issues. A student nurse urging young students to ignore condoms highlights the problem that, although nurses are trained health workers, they are not necessarily prepared for AIDS education. The same applies to most health professions.

Many of the speeches were made in English. It may have been better to engage youth in the vernacular, and at an accessible level. There was also a gulf between the youth and speechmakers. Standing on a podium and lecturing to students to take part in a campaign was typical of an hierarchical 'teacher teaches, students learn' classroom situation. These criticisms concern the launch, and not the overall campaign. Still, the launch did hint at issues which should be addressed in future.

Taking the Campaign Forward

COSAS recognised that youth and students could not depend on parents alone for sex education. The unquestioned, and problematic, assumption by health and education authorities that talking about sex will lead to promiscuity was challenged at the launch in a constructive way.

The campaign includes: engaging students in health education; running awareness workshops on AIDS, sexuality and teenage pregnancies; initiating national school health committees; and developing a policy on school health service. While involving students in self help, as it did with its Culture of Learning Campaign, COSAS understands that it would have to engage health organisations in this campaign. NPPHCN's NAP, as a community oriented organisation, was seen as a useful organisation to liaise with to guide sexuality



Girls have to protect themselves. Photo: Ismail Vawda

and AIDS education. Another role of NAP is to develop COSAS in such a way that it can articulate its demands around sexuality and AIDS education more clearly to the relevant authorities.

The Problem of Gatekeepers

In trying to make campaigns as broad based as possible, problems of ensuring the support of important agencies arise. That is, in schools, a national campaign may have to consult education and health authorities, who would feel that their territory is being intruded upon. In addition, other NGOs and teachers unions would feel slighted if not consulted. Thus, consultation with all the relevant agencies has to be ensured. For example, drama specialists at the University of Zululand worked closely with both teachers and students in a school to develop a programme designed to carry an AIDS message through drama. The aim was

to initiate behaviour change amongst high school students. However, one of the main problems in efforts to embark on programmes at schools was that of 'gatekeepers', that is, local officials in the education system. Sexuality education is not an option at schools. In KwaZulu, permission has been gained at ministerial level from both the Department of Education and the Department of Health to embark on a campaign in schools in KwaZulu. However, this still meant getting co-operation from the gatekeepers, including, chief inspectors, local inspectors, principals, as well as, superintendents and matrons from local hospitals and clinics, authorities noted for their conservatism. A broad based campaign has to engage a lot of agencies, including formal authorities, as well as NGOs, in order to ensure its success. Hence the success of future programmes will be linked to winning over the relevant 'gatekeepers'.

Cohesion and Coordination

Commenting on a lack of cohesion in the campaign, Songzo Mjongile, COSAS president, said he hoped that NPPHCN would be able to coordinate future programmes and campaigns between the different health groups. However, an achievement of the campaign so far has been the role of the NAP involving its regions with COSAS at ongoing local level workshops. The campaign has also produced posters and pamphlets on a national level. One region of the NAP, Natal Midlands, has developed a T-shirt in collaboration with COSAS.

COSAS has made no formal contact with the Department of Education and Training (DET) regarding the campaign. However, there has been contact with the South African Democratic Teachers Union (SADTU). In the AIDS campaign, they want to develop a relationship in which neither COSAS nor SADTU is a master or pupil. To this end, COSAS and SADTU will be having a joint workshop in October. This should be a useful move forward.

A group attempting to gain access to the DET is Macmillan Boleswa, who have published a set of 18 narratives, each in a separate book for standard four to matric. They are all illustrative real life situations where HIV has made an impact on the lives of individuals and the community. Accompanying the books are teachers guides with lesson ideas (*see resource list*). Macmillan have approached various school departments, including the House of Representatives, House of Delegates, and the DET. However, most have declined to buy the set because of inadequate funds. In the case of the Department of Education and Training, Old Mutual, the insurance conglomerate, has bought the books for standard four and five on behalf of DET schools in the Transvaal. Macmillan will be running training courses for teachers. Janet Foley, a

representative for Macmillan at the launch, said that they hoped that education departments would take the entire set. Foley maintains that it is shortsighted to only run a course for teachers of standard four and five, but at this stage it's better if children get access to some material rather than nothing at all.

COSAS and NAP invited a wide range of organisations to the launch, including political, civic and church groups. Most said they would attend, but failed to attend. As there are so many organisations who are liaising with one another, there needs to be greater coordination. There is a recognition that, through networking, better use is made of available resources and expertise, hinting at the need for a wider forum in which to plan programmes. The conveners of the launch also held press briefings, which most newspapers and journals did not attend. Neither did they publish the information sent to them about the launch. This reflects badly on the role of the mass print media in South Africa in its commitment to informing people about AIDS.

Sustaining the Campaign

The COSAS AIDS campaign is not the first attempt of its kind, but if it is to succeed, the various interest groups and their resources need to be drawn together. An AIDS activist pointed out that an issue that needs to be raised by COSAS is that of ensuring sustainability. Are enough support and resources being provided by other organisations in an integrated and coordinated way? Will COSAS' resources and support be developed to the point where it can be able to act independently at some stage? Given that COSAS is a student based organisation, is it planning the campaign in such a way that in two to three years, say, when current AIDS coordinators have left school, the campaign can sustain itself with fresh educators and coordinators?

This article was written by Ismail Vawda