



Civil Society update consultation on effective practices in adopting a human rights-based approach to eliminating preventable maternal mortality and morbidity

'Aunties' for reproductive and sexual health and non-violence

The International Alliance of Women, IAW, Equal Rights – Equal Opportunities – herewith submits a successful initiative for motivating and empowering young women in Cameroon to stand up for their right to choose.

The agents for change are local “Aunties” associations. In 2005 Aunties associations constitute the National Network of Aunties’ Associations, RENATA, was created. RENATA has mounted campaigns to prevent early unwanted pregnancy, reduce gender inequality and combat many forms of violence against women including *Breast Ironing*. Executive Secretary Georgette Arrey Taku, individual member of IAW, provided pertinent information. RENATA’s partner in the Health Ministry is Dr. Flavien Ndonko who developed the approach we describe below. Information on how unwed young mothers are empowered to become advocates, teachers and counsellors in Cameroon by the Aunties’ Project are on <http://www.german-practice-collection.org/en/successful-programmes/sexual-health-and-rights/aunties-for-sexual-health-and-non-violence-how-unwed-young-mothers-become-advocates-teachers-and-counsellors-in-cameroon>

The practice collection is a joint initiative by the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, BMZ, and the German International Cooperation, GIZ, RENATA’s main sponsor.

Quotes and information from the best practice applied by the Aunties’ Project are in inverted commas.

Why is the Aunties’ Project a promising practice?

“In order to make it into the German Practice Collection at least some of eight criteria must be met: The Aunties’ Project meets all of them. Specifically, it is **participatory, empowering, gender-aware, sustainable, and transferable.**

- It costs from €76 to €81 to train an Auntie and the costs beyond training are low and easily sustainable, since the project depends largely on volunteerism and donations in-kind.
- A 2006 survey of 802 trained Aunties found:
75% were very satisfied and 23% were moderately satisfied with their training.
- Before training, 26% always used condoms; after training and then attending Aunties’ association meetings regularly, 47% always used condoms.
- Since training, 19% had returned to school and 63% had taken other action to improve their economic prospects, such as serving an apprenticeship, entering a business or taking a part-time job.”

As to **transferability** the Aunties’ human rights-based approach has passed the snowball test in Cameroon (please see Achievements).

RENATA moreover: *In 2007, we received some visitors from the Ministry of Health in Tanzania who came to understand more about the Aunties project so that they can implement the same thing in their country. They spent some weeks observing different Aunties’ training and went back to their country.*

In Cameroon both English and French are spoken. Reports, material and tools are available in both languages, some in Spanish and local languages. This is important for eventually transferring the Aunties' Project to other francophone or anglophone African countries.

The situation in 2000 as shown in a study carried out by the German-Cameroon Health and AIDS Programme (PGCSS)

“Girls in Cameroon have followed worldwide trends towards sex before marriage, early sexual initiation and multiple sexual partners. This puts them at high risk of getting pregnant, being removed from school, forced into early marriage, harmed by unsafe abortion, and acquiring sexually transmitted infections including HIV. Cameroon's females are less well-informed about sex, are less likely to do what is necessary to prevent pregnancy and infection, and are much younger than their sexual partners.”

A strong patriarchal tradition where men have the say and women obey in matters of sexuality adds to adolescent girls' vulnerability. So does the fact that adolescents often lack access to contraception and legal abortion is restricted to medical necessity or rape.

Under these premises reducing maternal mortality and morbidity is no easy task.

The Aunties' Project

“In Cameroon, a girl's auntie used to be her most trusted confidante, teacher and counsellor on sexual matters. In 2001 PGCSS launched **the Aunties' Project** which borrows from this tradition. By mid-2010, the project had recruited more than 12,000 unwed young mothers who first got pregnant while in their teens and had given them basic training in sexual and reproductive health. So trained, unwed young mothers become known as “Aunties” and form local Aunties' associations, through which they support each other and also perform many of the functions aunts used to perform. However, these contemporary Aunties reach beyond their own families into their villages or urban neighbourhoods, providing young people with sex education in schools and counselling outside of schools.

Achievements

- Almost 90% of all unwed young mothers identified and interviewed during the recruitment process follow up by taking the basic training and joining local Aunties' associations.
- By mid-2010, there were more than 240 local Aunties' associations spread across all ten provinces, with 12,000 trained Aunties.
- Around 3,000 Aunties were experienced and skilled educators in sexual health and, working in pairs,
- they had the potential of reaching as many as 300,000 students per year.
- More than 4,300 Aunties were experienced and skilled counsellors
- and they had the potential of reaching more than 64,000 young people per year.”

The Aunties' Project comprises 7 steps

1) Situation analysis which found for example

“that one third of the unwed young females had had two or more sexual partners within the past year and that, of that one third, half did not use condoms and 21% had already had at least one unwanted pregnancy. The situation analysis also keeps track of current policies and practices. For example, contraceptives are available but in places that are not friendly to unwed young people and at prices many cannot afford”.

2) Mobilisation

“The Aunties' Project first asks for permission and support from a village or urban neighbourhood, the appropriate government, health and education authorities.

This ensures that they understand that the Project has a limited budget and depends on voluntary contributions, including their contributions of space for training courses and meetings and, in the case of health authorities, staff willing to participate in some training sessions. A team headed by a social worker or social scientist then enters the village or neighbourhood and begins identifying and interviewing unwed young mothers. As news of their activity spreads, more unwed young mothers come forward and volunteer to be interviewed. During the interviews they are told about the Aunties' Project and invited to attend a basic training course".

3) Training and tools

"A basic five-days training qualifies unwed young mothers as Aunties providing them with knowledge and skills pertaining to sexual and reproductive health and related counselling and education of young people. Trainers come from the Ministry of Health and the Ministry for Women's Empowerment and the Family, skilled and experienced Aunties make up the balance of training teams. The training is highly participatory and aims to give Aunties courage and experience at speaking out and sharing their personal experiences. During basic training, all Aunties are provided with counselling skills and tools and roughly one-third turn out to have the personal qualities that make them effective counsellors."

RENATA: The Aunties are very much aware that the training not only helps them to acquire knowledge and start an income generating activity but also to become aware of their rights. Back in Cameroon, so many people grow up without any knowledge of their rights. In our training module, we have a presentation on the rights of the child and since we usually have more than half of the participants who are less than 18 years, this session indirectly applies to them too. During their training they learn about the rights they were deprived of and this creates a lot of awareness and motivates them to become hard working so as to be able to give their children their full rights.

"The tools include flow-charts to guide them through typical counselling situations, for example the question what a girl should do when her boyfriend refuses to wear a condom. Aunties with the personal qualities that make them well suited for sex education in schools are provided with a set of tools that enables them to organize and deliver a series of short presentations. Each presentation focuses on one topic such as, for example, what girls and boys experience during puberty."

RENATA: In a bid to promote adolescents' and girls' rights, we support some less privileged teenage mothers among the 'Aunties' to go back to school. We have a very high demand asking for grants but due to our limited resources, there are very strict criteria used for selection.

4) This step deals with "**building local Aunties' associations** based on a model constitution, electoral code and set of internal rules for a local Aunties' association developed in 2003 at a national workshop of Aunties. Local associations may revise and adapt these sets of rules for their own purposes."

5) Community, school and individual interventions

"Newly trained Aunties begin in their own families, talking to their sisters and other young female relatives and helping them avoid falling into the same traps they fell into. Then they reach out to young females in their own immediate neighbourhoods and in any religious, sports, youth or other groups they belong to."

RENATA: *After the training, they go out into the community and sensitize **both men and women** and they counsel adolescents in difficult situations.*

“As the Aunties gain experience, some show the personal qualities that make them well-suited for counselling or for sex education in schools.”

RENATA: *In the Cameroonian education system, there exists a kind of sex education in theory but this is hardly ever dispensed. Most often the teachers are too shy and they avoid questions on sexuality from their pupils. RENATA on its part has a project going on in some primary schools around the capital in which we work with pupils from the nursery to primary schools. And at the end of this project, we will lobby so that this model be adopted in the school curriculum and should go operational in schools as from the next academic year.”*
And: *“The presentations about how to avoid pregnancy and HIV are usually adapted when talking to the young people outside the education system. We use Pidgin English since most of the time this population is made of people who are school dropouts. In case we are in a French zone, the facilitators try to sensitize in simple terms.*

“Provided with tools and support, the Aunties eventually become recognized as ‘experts’ anyone in their communities can turn to with sexual and reproductive health and related problems. Skilled Aunties backed-up by well-established Aunties’ associations and reinforced by the Aunties’ Project staff can be powerful forces for the good in their communities, giving young people somewhere they can go for protection and letting others know that exploitive or abusive behaviour may no longer be hidden from view and tolerated.”

In short: the human rights-based approach is omnipresent in the Aunties’ Project.

6) Spreading the word through the media

“A newspaper article about an Aunties’ association, a radio interview with an Auntie or the personal testimony of an Auntie on television – all of these are good ways of informing the general public about the realities facing young people and things that can be done to prevent unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted infection. The media also provide opportunities to shed light on largely hidden problems such as incest, rape, illegal and life-threatening abortion and female circumcision. The PGCSS, RENATA and other partners have collaborated on producing a number of films and videos.”

7) On-going management and monitoring and evaluation of the Aunties’ Project produces sufficient evidence that it is an **effective** and **cost-efficient** way of reaching towards its objectives.

Its most important achievements are listed on page 2.

RENATA on the network’s future: *It will be of great help if IAW could present our approach at the OHCHR level because the GIZ is gradually withdrawing. They have given RENATA their financial assistance ever since its creation, and definitely by 2012, RENATA will no longer benefit from any financial assistance from them. Besides, RENATA has many other activities that are not being financially covered by GIZ like the Education Project. For now, RENATA sponsors this activity on its own. Please see also www.tantines.org*

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