INERELA+ Sierra Leone Demonstrates Resilience during the Ebola Epidemic

During the Ebola outbreak in 2013 INERELA+ Sierra Leone brought together 60 Religious Leaders and trained them on Ebola and HIV and AIDS using the SAVE Toolkit. INERELA+ Sierra Leone realised that neglecting HIV and AIDS even in this dire situation, could result into increased teenage pregnancies and consequent HIV transmission especially amongst the younger generation as reported by the UN Population Fund. Thus the intervention of INERELA+ Sierra Leone to focus on both Ebola and HIV & AIDS was timely and fitting.

**INERELA+ and SANERELA+ Jointly Organise the SAVE Toolkit Training in South Africa**

As part of its efforts to stimulate greater involvement of Religious Leaders from different denominations in the HIV response in their own lives and that of their communities, SANERELA+ and the INERELA+ Secretariat organised a 3-day training that was funded by SADC. This training took place at Sierra Hotel in Randburg, South Africa, from 14 – 16 April 2016. A total of 23 (twenty-three) participants comprising of interfaith religious leaders, representatives of traditional healers and the LGBTI community benefited from the training. The training focused on strategies to eradicate stigma and discrimination, which are major drivers of the AIDS epidemic. During the session of gender and sexuality, Reverend Phumzile Mabizela, the Executive Director of INERELA+ had this to say: “We have rejected the homosexual community and this made them vulnerable to HIV. They experience rejection and that is the reason why they don’t want to mingle with other people fearing stigma and discrimination.”

**Reunion of Global Faith Consortium for Getting to Zero (GFCG Zero)**

On the 15th of July 2016, INERELA+ convened a meeting bringing together partners of the Global Faith Consortium of Getting to Zero (GFCG Zero) which includes INERELA+, Lutheran World Federation, WCC-EHAI, WCC-EAA and World Young Women Christian Association. The purpose of the meeting was to identify areas of synergy and endorse a commitment to work together despite ending of the Robert Carr Network Fund contract. The partners were grateful for the opportunity to work together but bemoaned ending of the project when more work is yet to be done.

**Clarifying the Roles of Religious Leaders’ Champions**

A meeting with selected Religious Leaders who are implementing the SAVE approach in South Africa was organised by INERELA+ on 10 May 2016. The purpose of this meeting was to identify roles, responsibilities and selection criteria of a Religious Leader champion. During this meeting, a Focus Group Discussion was held around the typical responsibilities that Religious Leaders play and how these can be strengthened.
The meeting unanimously agreed that the Religious Leader Champions should play the following key roles and responsibilities:

- Promoting acceptance for people in denial
- Promoting beneficial disclosure
- Showing compassion and empathy by offering comfort, support and clarity to stigmatised people
- Coordinating and training congregants on pro-SAVE and anti-SSDDIM interventions
- Providing supportive counselling

Ghana Conducts the SAVE Training for Women Religious Leaders

A total of 25 female participants that included Religious Leaders, human rights lawyers and journalists were capacitated on the SAVE methodology from June 21-23, 2016 in Ghana. The purpose of this training was to explore the role of Religious Leaders in transforming traditional and cultural practices with regard to issues related to gender and HIV. The INERELA+ Executive Director, the Programmes Manager and the National Coordinator of INERELA+ Ghana facilitated the workshop. The training enabled the participants to open up on issues affecting them in churches. During the course of the training, one of the participants uttered these sentiments: “It is my first time to attend an HIV workshop. I will not let what I have learnt go to waste.”

Bringing the Media on Board in South Africa

As part of the SADC project, the Faith Centre Malvern Assembly convened a Health meeting on May 17, 2016 with special focus on stigma and discrimination associated with HIV and AIDS treatment, care and support. The workshop which brought together some 32 pastors from Gauteng, South Africa was organised by SANERELA+ in partnership with Brothers for Life Campaign and African Humanitarian Institute. The workshop was facilitated by the SANERELA+ chairperson, Dr Mbulelo Dyasi. The Star Newspaper was in attendance and captured experiences of the participants. The workshop was a success in that it lobbyed senior church leaders to support and pledge not to discriminate against people on the basis of their health conditions. Following the workshop, the participants issued a joint media statement particularly to acknowledge the TEST and Treat Campaign announced by Minister Aaron Motsoaledi and WHO. The workshop also provided an opportunity for the project to get support from the Gauteng and the City of Johannesburg Departments of Health, as well as the South African Men’s Action Group (SAMAG). Bishop Mpempe, one of the participants from Orange farm retorted: ‘Church leaders’ first responsibility is to save lives and promote humanity through social positive norms and values of Christianity.”

The Revival of SANERELA+

The INERELA+ South African Chapter commonly known as SANERELA+ had not been functioning at full throttle since it faced dwindling financial support for HIV and AIDS in 2012. Since then, it has focused on SAVE Training with funding support from SADC and technical support from the INERELA+ Secretariat. During the SADC SAVE Training which took place at Sierra Hotel on May 11-13, 2016, SANERELA+ elected an
interim board from among the Religious Leaders and traditional leaders who attended the SAVE training. The interim board has been instrumental in helping SANERELA+ to be back on track including securing funding from the Department of Health to run multiple programmes such HCT and SRHR.

As part of the revival of SANERELA+, the interim board convened the Annual General Meeting (AGM) on the 19th of August 2016 at Olive Tree Guest House. Religious Leaders from Limpopo, North West, Eastern Cape, Mpumalanga and Gauteng attended. However, due to financial constraints, it was not possible to bring a fair representation from the provinces. Abubaker Sebeela, the General Secretary, facilitated the meeting, aided by Reverend Sekete Khanye. Harvey Sambo, the former Chairperson shared the minutes of the previous AGM, reminding the participants what had led to the near demise of SANERELA+.

A fresh election of new board members was not held as the participants unanimously agreed that the interim board should be given ample time to do their work considering that since their election, SANERELA+ has managed to secure some funding from the Department of Health.

Building Partnerships and Networks

As part of networking and partnering, INERELA+ was invited by House of Rainbow to attend an LGBTI seminar in Soweto on the 28th of July 2016. Richard Nyengera, Program Assistant, represented INERELA+ and delivered a presentation on the SAVE methodology and how it relates to gay people. The concept of SSDDIM was explored, especially how it relates to key populations. A total of 25 participants were expected to attend and surprisingly, the turnout was much greater. Parents, relatives and friends of the gay community were in attendance to show their support to the gay community. Religious Leaders from different Christian denominations and Muslim Immams also attended the seminar. This was a good opportunity for the gay community to hear from both the Muslims and Christians, views about homosexuality. The seminar helped to remove misconceptions that people have about the gay community. The day was highly interactive with both parties challenging how they view each other, citing sacred texts.
Increasing Uptake of HIV Counselling and Testing in Mopani District, South Africa

Under the AidsFonds Project, INERELA+ and ANOVA jointly implemented a SAVE training in Mopane district, Limpopo Province, from August 15-18, 2016. The training aimed at increasing the uptake of HIV Counselling and Testing (HCT) services by men within the faith communities. A total of 8 women and 8 male Religious Leaders were in attendance, all drawn from the 5 sub-districts of Mopane district.

During this training, a number of issues were explored which included; the basic facts on HIV & AIDS, sexuality and gender and the move from ABC to SAVE. Myths and misconceptions that the participants held before the training were dealt with and they were provided with accurate information. The goals of the campaign were also presented at the workshop.

Participation at the International AIDS Conference (IAC) 2016, Durban

The Rev. Phumzile Mabizela, Executive Director of INERELA+, challenged those gathered at the IAC to do more about gender-based violence. “We are not addressing the critical drivers of the virus; issues like vulnerability to gender-based violence and our teachings do not promote love and compassion,” she said. “One of the things we have done well as FBOs is outreach, however, we have not done nearly enough ‘in-reach.’ Has the work we are doing transformed our theologies?” she asked?

The Rev. Dr Nyambura Njorge, coordinator the World Council of Churches Ecumenical HIV and AIDS Initiatives and Advocacy, urged the participants gathered to move beyond just dealing with gender-based violence as a driver of the HIV pandemic to supporting the victims of this abuse.

Jane Nganga’s IAC Involvement

INERELA+ Kenya was also represented at the International AIDS Conference in Durban by the National Coordinator, Jane Nganga who presented a session titled “Religion and SRHR: Engaging with faith-based institutions”. The session focused on key advocacy issues addressed in congregations which include: child protection policies, mainstreaming of age appropriate education in existing curriculums and budgets for children departments within congregations.
Jane noted that INERELA+ Kenya, as part of its advocacy work, is also promoting CSE&I through the training of children educators and young people through Religious Leaders. Eradication of HIV & AIDS related stigma is one of the core business of INERELA+ Kenya and this is done through collaboration work involving Religious Leaders in dialogues to change how they view people living with HIV and AIDS.

Update from MANERELA+, MALAWI

MANERELA+ has been selected as sub-sub-recipient in two HIV Global Fund Grants running for two years each. The first grant is focusing on the general population, Prevention of Mother to Child Transmission, and community systems strengthening and will be implemented in Kasungu and Dedza districts. The other grant will be implemented in Mulanje and Lilongwe peri-urban and will focus on Sexual and reproductive health among Adolescent girls and young women. The role of MANERELA+ in both grants is to increase the uptake of the services by mobilizing communities through the Religious Leaders.

In July, MANERELA+ appointed a new director. Mr. Dennis Mseu comes with a lot of expertise that combines integrated program cycle experience with in depth knowledge of HIV & AIDS and child protection in Malawi coupled with years of experience in planning, managing, resource mobilization, grant management and implementing programs. He has wide experience working with both government and non-governmental organizations. He previously worked with World Vision as a zonal coordinator for Advocacy and Justice for Children. We welcome Dennis and look forward to great work from him and his team.