INERELA+ Europe Retreat, Sweden

INERELA+ Europe reconvened on the 6th - 8th October 2017 in Vattholma, Sweden. Ten participants from UK, Denmark and Sweden attended the meeting that aimed at adopting the new constitution and formally elected the network board headed by Jide Macaulay, founder and CEO of House of Rainbow. Over seventy people have shown interest of becoming members from across the continent. INERELA+ Europe is determined to make a positive contribution to reduce the levels of vulnerability of people related to HIV and AIDS through working with Religious Leaders, migrant communities and other key affected populations. INERELA+ Board was represented by Rev Dr Jim Matarazzo who read a statement of support from the Chair, Rev Father F. Nseka.

INERELA+ Europe team take a photo after the meeting
Meeting with UNAIDS Director, RSTESA at INERELA+ Secretariat, Randburg, South Africa

INERELA+ had the privilege of hosting the newly appointed UNAIDS Director, Regional Support Team for Eastern and Southern Africa Dr Catherine Sozi, at their offices in Randburg on the 5th of October. She was accompanied by Mr Becher N'Daw, the Senior Advisor on Political Partnerships and Social Justice. It was the first time a meeting of this nature had been held between the two organisations. The INERELA+ Executive Director took the opportunity to give a brief history of INERELA+. The meeting touched on issues of sexual violence, HIV treatment, stigma and discrimination which need to be addressed through collaboration by the various civil societies in the region. It was further agreed that the faith community should take a more active role in identifying champions to address stigma which is emerging as the new epidemic.

ZINERELA+ Annual General Meeting, Zimbabwe

INERELA+ Zimbabwe held its Annual General Meeting at the Harare Showground on the 27th of October. Forty people attended the meeting which was meant to elect new board members and adopt the constitution. Nine board members were elected representing the geographical provinces. Reverend Phumzile Mabizela, the Executive Director of INERELA+ delivered a keynote address encouraging the newly elected board to be proactive in securing resources for INERELA+ Zimbabwe. She further added that, “The first meeting to form INERELA+ took place in Zimbabwe, therefore it is unacceptable that Zimbabwe should have a dysfunctional network.”
Men’s dialogue with H. E. Deputy President Cyril Ramaphosa held in Soshanguve, Pretoria

SANERELA+ held a men’s dialogue on the 17th of August which was graced by His Excellency the Deputy President Cyril Ramaphosa as a follow-up to the Soweto dialogue held earlier in the year. The dialogue was supported by the South Africa National AIDS Council, Show Me Your Number project and the National Department of Health. It was attended by 1000 participants made up of Religious Leaders, civil society groups and youth. The Deputy President Ramaphosa called for an initiative, “Take a boy child to work,” as a campaign against the neglect of young men in society aimed at helping them grow up “loathing all sorts of sexism” prevalent in communities. DP Ramaphosa spoke vehemently against drug abuse, and the “blessed” culture, calling upon all people to join hands in the fight against drug abuse. “We need to develop a curriculum to teach young people about the dangers of drugs.” he said. Also present was Minister of Health Dr Aaron Motsoaledi who scolded men as being responsible for most HIV transmission and encouraged them to get tested and take responsible action as required. The outcome of the dialogue was incorporated in a report presented to the bi-annual Takuwani Riime men’s parliament on the 19th of November as part of International Men’s Day.

MANERELA+ Implementing “Our bodies, Our Lives”, Malawi

SANERELA+ Malawi is implementing a project dubbed “Our bodies, Our Lives” across 15 districts in Malawi. This is funded by Comic Relief UK through Just Associates and is aimed at building the capacity of women living positively to demand good quality HIV and AIDS treatment related services. A number of organisations are involved in this campaign which enabled strategic engagements with traditional leaders upon the realisation that these leaders are influential in facilitating change across many areas. The project team held discussions with traditional leaders on issues affecting women living with HIV such as barriers to accessing antiretroviral drugs. Both traditional leaders and women reached a consensus on how to address challenges of acquiring medication. Traditional leaders pledged to take the concerns to village development committees and area development committees.
Regional ASRHR training held in Lusaka, Zambia

INERELA+, Save the Children and UNESCO jointly held a three day workshop on Adolescent Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights for Religious Leaders from the 7th - 9th November in Lusaka, Zambia. The workshop was attended by 31 Religious Leaders representing Christian and Muslim faiths drawn from 11 countries which include Botswana, Kenya, Lesotho, South Africa, Mozambique, Swaziland, Sweden, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe. The workshop was graced by the Zambian Minister of National Guidance and Religious Affairs Honourable Rev Godfredah Somaili, who in her address acknowledged the fact that Religious Leaders play a pivotal role in shaping the moral fibre of society and that their public opinion can influence the entire nation and region. She urged the Religious Leaders to draw strategies from their sacred texts that speak to several concerns including the issues of abstinence and the sanctity of life. Dr Patricia Machawira, the HIV and Health Education Advisor of UNESCO stressed the importance of close collaboration between schools, parents and Religious Leaders as ASRHR is not only a health and women issue but for all. Grace Kerongo represented INERELA+ and encouraged Religious Leaders to use their influence to spread the crucial information they received at the workshop. The workshop ended with each country framing an execution plan for information and knowledge sharing within their contexts.

Religious Leaders commit to eliminate Sexual and Gender-Based Violence, Nigeria

In the month of August, NINERELA+ with the support from selected churches South Eastern Nigeria, carried out an outreach during the “August meeting” (a ceremony held by churches during the month of August), to transmit messages of HIV prevention, stigma reduction, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence with the aid of NINERELA+ champions openly living with HIV. Over 2000 people were reached during these campaigns. This was followed by a breakfast meeting on strengthening partnerships for grassroots response against Sexual and Gender-Based Violence held in Abuja on the 29th of November. The meeting was held as part of the campaign during the 16-days of activism against gender based violence. The purpose of the meeting was to bring Religious Leaders and experts together to identify strategies to fight against SGBV through the use of faith platforms in Nigeria. Several organisations represented at the meeting included; Nigerian Human Rights Commission, Nigerian Prison, CSOs, National AIDS Council, Government youth ministry, the media among others.

Honourable Minister Godfredah Somaili joins participants at a photo session

NINERELA+ country coordinator, Amber and partners during the meeting to strengthen partnerships’ response against SGBV
Regional Dialogue between religious leaders and LGBTIQ persons, South Africa

On the 20th-22nd November, INERELA+ convened a regional dialogue at Apollo Hotel between Religious Leaders and LGBTIQ persons aimed at enhancing knowledge, reduce stigma and discrimination and produce creative collaboration. Fourteen participants drawn from Kenya, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Ghana, Malawi, South Africa and DRC were in attendance. The dialogue provided Religious Leaders and the Key Population a conducive platform to discuss cardinal issues openly and both parties pledged to initiate partnerships with Faith-Based HIV service organisations to challenge attitudes and practices that marginalise PLHIV.

Reverend Phumzile Mabizela delivered a powerful message encouraging Religious Leaders to abstain from using scriptures to wrongfully judge people based on their sexual orientation or sero-status and not to ban LGBTIQ persons from places of worship as mosques, synagogues and churches are meant for sinners. LGBTIQ persons were urged not to run away from places of worship as this creates an out of sight, out of mind reality, but instead to approach religious leaders when in need.

UNAIDS Country Director visit to the UNERELA+ offices in Kampala

On the 14th of November, INERELA+ Uganda held a meeting with the newly appointed UNAIDS Country Director, Dr Karusa Kirangu. In attendance was the Executive Director of NAFOPHANU Stella Kentuusi, Asiki Eli Alibe a board member of INERELA+ Uganda and Margaret Bategeza. Dr Karusa promised to arrange another meeting where UNERELA+ would join a consortia of civil society organisations that would constantly meet to review HIV and AIDS programs in Uganda. She was impressed by the SAVE approach methodology and took a copy with her.
Training of Religious Leaders to increase men’s uptake of HIV counselling and testing services, South Africa

South Africa Network of Religious Leaders Living with or personally affected by HIV and AIDS (SANERELA+), with support from INERELA+ secretariat and ANOVA Health Institute organized a three-day training for sixteen Religious Leaders from the 28th-30th of November. The purpose of the training was to strengthen the capacity of Religious Leaders in establishing self-sustained congregational-led HIV campaigns within faith communities to lure more men to HIV counselling and testing. The project is sponsored by Aids Fonds and currently targets Religious Leaders and their congregations in Alexandra, Orange Farm and Soweto following the successful implementation of the project in Tzaneen and Giyani (Limpopo). The Chairperson of SANERELA+, Archbishop Dr Mbuwelo Dyasi graced the training and challenged Religious Leaders to play an active role in curbing HIV prevalence. He emphasized that “You don’t have to be HIV positive to stop the spread of HIV. You don’t have to be a survivor to stop Gender Based Violence in this country. We need selfless leaders like Archbishop Desmond Tutu.” Religious Leaders pledged to work in collaboration with SANERELA+ during the mobilization campaigns to ensure that more men are reached for HCT services.

Parents advised to spend quality time with children, Accra, Ghana

Parents have been entreated to spend quality time with their children rather than solely committing their time to making money to help curb vices in the society. Mercy Acquah-Hayford, the National Coordinator of INERELA+ Ghana, made the call in an interview with the Ghana News Agency at a stakeholder’s forum to climax the 16-days of activism against Gender based violence. Mercy said it was not beneficial for parents to make money at the expense of their children, adding that the future of the country depended on the care given to the present generation. “Lack of parental care is one of the contributing factors leading to increase in social vices amongst the youth,” she said. The stakeholder’s forum was held on 14th December and attended by clinical psychologists, religious and community leaders, legal practitioners, government agencies, health workers, Domestic Violence and Victims Support Unit (DOVVSU) of the Ghana Police Service and media to deliberate on measures to help curb the menace. The stakeholders, after a fruitful discussion, developed an action plan to help salvage gender-based violence and to intensify community and school outreach, provide counselling for victims of violence, give biblical sermons in churches, host sensitisation programmes as well as support victims of gender-based violence.
Sierra Leone conducts HIV and AIDS related friendly Sunday schools

Despite financial constraints, INERELA+ Sierra Leone conducted friendly Sundays in churches utilising the SAVE Toolkit to teach people on HIV and AIDS, stigma and discrimination. Congregants are tested for HIV after the service by a counsellor from a government hospital. The program was expected to reach as many churches as possible but due to limited funding, it targeted only three churches. This created awareness among the congregants resulting in 90 people getting tested for HIV. The last friendly Sunday was scheduled to take place on the 17th of December.

A Tale to tell from INERELA+ Kenya by O’Brian

Are some secrets greater than others? Are there secrets worth keeping to ourselves forever? How important are certain secrets? Do they have a meaning in our life or not? Are some secrets like the can of worms? Or the Pandora’s Box? We all, at some point tend to ask ourselves these questions and never come up with concrete answers.

It may be easy to disclose some secrets, but when it comes to HIV/AIDS, how easy is it to disclose one’s HIV status? To many, disclosure of HIV status goes beyond just revealing the status, it involves asking questions about the reaction of the other person and how they will behave afterwards. For decades, disclosure of HIV status has been one of the greatest challenges for People Living with HIV. PLHIVs fear losing friends once they disclose their status, hence choose to silence. Indeed, the stigma index in Kenya paints a gloomy picture of stigma and discrimination against PLHIV.

For parents living with HIV, disclosing their status to their children is very difficult. Caregivers and parents struggle daily with the idea of how to disclose to their children the reason they must not only take drugs for the rest of their lives, but must also adhere to the timetable of taking drugs, without missing even a single day. For some parents, deception has been their weapon. Some children have been told they are taking multi-vitamin drugs while others have been told they are taking asthma medication.

For those who have broken the silence, they have been confronted by angry children who have accused them of being careless and infecting them. Other children have rebelled and refused to take further medication, thereby risking their lives. However, confronting the situation at an early age by revealing the HIV status of the child to him/her, and the reason they must be on medication helps them to begin to heal psychologically. With time the children begin to understand the HIV response.

HIV is a Virus, not a Moral issue

As I was sitting waiting to be examined for vitals in one of the hospitals in Nairobi, I noticed that adjacent to the examining room was a VCT counselling room. Soon a lady walked out and I could see from her eyes she was troubled. Myriad questions rushed through my mind including; “What steps will she be directed to after knowing her HIV status?”, “Will she be willing to disclose her status to her spouse (if she is married) or her relatives and if so, how does she do it?”

These, among other questions continue to plague those who choose to know their status.

While one can safely hide for some time, it won’t be long before their status is known.
INERELA+ in Pictures

Uganda UNAIDS country director signing the UNERELA+ visitors’ book

Religious Leaders together with ANOVA and INERELA+ staff members.

Female participants in a discussion session during the “August meeting” in South Eastern state, Nigeria

Participants pose for a picture during the meeting against SGBV, Nigeria

Mercy with some participants during the meeting against SGBV, Ghana

Participants during a HIV&SGBV session in Kasasa Christian Fellowship, Hoima, Uganda

Mural to sensitize the community on the fight against SGBV in Orlando, South Africa

Pastor Tamaly on a slippery road on her way to talk to children on HIV and AIDS in a school in Kaberamaido, Uganda