

Links for Life -- Communities of Practice
Promoting learning towards integrated HIV and FNS programming

Integrated Programming: Addressing the epidemics of HIV and hunger in a dual and complementary manner is referred to as ‘**integrated HIV and food and nutrition security (FNS) programming**’. In an HIV context, thinking in terms of *integration* helps address the impacts of HIV and FNS in a sustainable manner. In fact, integrated HIV and FNS programming is the only kind of programming that ultimately works, since without one, the other is inevitably undermined (see box at right).

Africa Forum 2006: In May 2006, PCI Zambia hosted *Africa Forum 2006: The Dual Epidemics of HIV/AIDS and Food Insecurity*. The Forum brought together 221 public health and development practitioners (from 20 countries) to share experiences in integrated HIV and FNS programming. The aim of Africa Forum 2006 was both to strengthen collective programmatic efforts, as well as to inform policy decisions based on ‘frontline’ realities.

Reactions to the event were both moving and inspiring. Upon return to their countries, many participants made attempts to continue exchanging ideas across organizations, towards the goal of learning more about integrated programming. Unfortunately, without formal support or a mechanism for structuring the collaboration, these efforts faltered.

The Links for Life CoP Initiative: In response to requests for assistance from Forum participants, PCI and several partners have begun to design the Links for Life Communities of Practice (CoP) initiative on the topic of integrated HIV and FNS programming. The design is based on lessons learned from other successful (private and public sector) CoP models world-wide, which share the goal of generating and stewarding practitioner-based knowledge.

The initiative is supported and guided by an *ad hoc* steering committee, composed of prominent partners including CARE, Catholic Relief Services (CRS), Concern Worldwide, Georgetown University, Global Health Council, IFPRI/Renewal, Oxfam, Save the Children and World Vision. Links for Life CoP is part of a larger, PCI-facilitated effort which includes the upcoming **Links for Life Africa Forum 2008** (tentatively planned for November 2008 in Malawi) and the advocacy-focused **Links for Life FANSHA** group (Food & Nutrition Security HIV & AIDS Advocacy).

The goal of the Links for Life Communities of Practice initiative is to “promote learning on emerging practices in integrated HIV and FNS programming, with the ultimate goal of scaling up what works.” This unique learning-oriented initiative aims to achieve this by establishing a ‘Community’ of Practice in two countries – (to be selected from among Ethiopia, Malawi and Zambia) – where practitioners from NGOs, FBOs, government, the UN and other relevant institutions will come together to explore ideas, think together and share relevant knowledge.

THE PROBLEM: Poverty and hunger play key roles in fueling the HIV epidemic in Africa. Hunger drives people to engage in risky coping strategies, such as migrating to cities in search of employment, or resorting to transactional sex as a way of obtaining food. In cases where malnutrition prevails, the immune system is weakened, and susceptibility to disease increases. Although ART is becoming increasingly available, treatment will fail if patients are nutritionally compromised. Without nutritious food, patients are often too ill to successfully start ART. And once on treatment, interruptions due to hunger will contribute to treatment failure and drug resistance.

THE SOLUTION: Interventions that aim to support livelihoods and improve household food security can help prevent the spread of HIV. And nutritional support aimed at immune system strengthening and prevention of malnutrition can extend the asymptomatic period, slowing down the need for ART among those infected, and providing time for overburdened health systems to build capacity to meet ART demand. Nutrition support can also assist those who are on ART to adhere to their medication regimen.

More specifically, the CoPs will identify emerging practices in integrated programming, and examine their success across selected 'programmatic elements' such as targeting, sustainability, exit strategies, beneficiary graduation, holistic design, and/or M&E.

Links for Life CoP Interaction: Each CoP will have a salaried Coordinator, with the role of planning and facilitating learning activities, including face-to-face meetings; speaker engagements followed by discussions; visits to project sites; teleconferences; project task collaboration; on-line discussion groups (e.g. yahoo, google, etc.); and where internet connectivity allows, on-line collaborative learning via wikis and/or e-portfolios.

Knowledge Products: Members of CoPs bond and engage over their interest in a particular topic; but interest alone is not enough. A healthy CoP must *deliver value* with respect to each member's ability to pursue their professional discipline (i.e. their 'practice'). While *tacit* learning will often take place simply as a result of interaction between peers; more *explicit* learning will result from the deliberate creation of 'knowledge products' (documented learning) -- a key requirement of a Community of Practice that seeks to support its members' 'practice'.

The CoP initiative will therefore aim to creatively document and share learning with regard to selected emerging practices. This learning – in the form of 'knowledge products' -- will be featured at Africa Forum 2008, and disseminated via partners and other practitioner-oriented media.

Specific Impact: The specific impacts the Links for Life CoP initiative aims to achieve are:

- ✓ Create well-established mechanisms (Communities of Practice) for sharing learning across organizations and countries
- ✓ Increase knowledge and ability to design and implement integrated HIV and FNS programmes among CoP members and their organizations/institutions
- ✓ Create knowledge products/tools that assist other practitioners to design and implement integrated HIV and FNS programming
- ✓ Contribute to a more enabling policy environment for integrated HIV and FNS programming

The Links for Life Communities of Practice initiative will be launched during FY2008 and is currently seeking financial support. For more information, or for a copy of the detailed strategic plan, please contact Gwenelyn O'Donnell-Blake, D.C. Office Director and Food Security Technical Officer, Project Concern International. Phone: (202) 223-0088; Fax: (202) 662-8995
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COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

CoPs have become associated with 'knowledge management' as people have begun to see them as ways of developing social capital, nurturing new knowledge, stimulating innovation, or sharing existing tacit knowledge within an organization. They are now an accepted part of organizational development. Below are several examples of current-day CoPs.

Chrysler started up CoPs called 'tech clubs' which developed lessons learned and best practices and compiled them into EBoks (engineering books of knowledge) which were made easily accessible to staff. This initiative made a crucial contribution to structural changes behind the company's resurgence in the 1990's.

Shell Oil created CoPs to sponsor the pooling of knowledge between experts in the same discipline, who were separated by corporate organization into different profit centers. Similarly, **Mckinsey & Company** has used communities of practice since the early 1980's to reduce the duplication of effort caused by the dispersion of their global offices.

Save the Children has established a Community of Practice to support programming in the education sector for their domestic (US) program. The goal is to create a place for the educators in partner schools to meet online, exchange ideas and teaching techniques, and improve access to program guidelines. The programs are focused around literacy, nutrition and early childhood development.

Catholic Relief Services (CRS)

CRS created a CoP among its HIV programming practitioners across the globe. The CoP interacts through an email discussion group; shares information and experiences; and helps one another trouble shoot problems and constraints. The CoP was recently used by CRS headquarters to elicit and document promising practices in Home Based Care programming.