

Statement on Progressio's position regarding HIV and issues around tackling HIV

The situation

In our Africa programmes we are working in countries – for instance Zimbabwe – where incidence of HIV is very high.

In Zimbabwe, the estimated life expectancy is 37. It is estimated that every week 2,000 people die in Zimbabwe from AIDS-related illnesses. This is happening in a country where there is little access to medicine and hospital care. We cannot exaggerate just how catastrophic this pandemic is to the development of peoples and to countries as a whole. The response to the situation is far from simple.

We also work in other countries where the prevalence of HIV is not so high (for instance 1% in Somaliland) but this is a reason to work on the issue (especially in prevention) rather than not.

For Progressio, HIV is a fundamental issue for development and must be considered in relation to other key development issues – poverty, the role of women, education and health.

The complexity of the issue

- Addressing HIV is a complex question. It requires activity at a number of levels which includes care and support, information and awareness, openness and understanding.
- Strategies at individual, community and society levels are required to change attitudes and behaviour to reduce risk and limit transmission of infection.
- Changing sexual behaviour is a vital part, but only a part of the complexity of issues around HIV. Acknowledgement needs to be made of the impact of poverty on HIV and AIDS and on the ability to tackle it.
- Tackling the ignorance and stigma which leads to discrimination is also vital, so accurate information is essential as well as effective mechanisms for care.
- HIV has to be seen within the context of the country concerned. This requires culturally sensitive responses and an understanding of the impact of poverty and cultural elements. Recognising different levels of power between men and women is also a vital consideration.

Many discussions about HIV focus on the mechanics – the drugs or the condoms. When the reality of the epidemic is of people dying, it is important to consider all aspects of the debate. Talking only about barrier methods of prevention limits the debate and misses so much of the picture.

Progressio's position

- Tackling HIV requires a holistic approach – and this means recognising all the options available for changing behaviour and acting responsibly. Our work supports a variety of projects reflecting the wide-ranging way in which addressing HIV needs to be seen.
- It is vital that people have access to information that is correct and are therefore able to make their own decisions. There is much misleading information around.
- Progressio supports a number of specialist development workers in HIV and AIDS and encourages all other development workers to seek ways of integrating HIV and AIDS into their work with partner organisations.
- We stand against any form of discrimination or prejudice against those who are HIV-positive or suffering from AIDS.

- Progressio believes that condoms are one important element in any strategy to prevent sexual transmission of HIV and encourages an informed debate about their use – in both Christian and Muslim societies.
- We support the use of anti-retroviral treatments (ART), especially in reducing mother to child transmissions. However ART has to go hand-in-hand with other elements to encourage prevention such as education and information and strengthened health care structures.
- Progressio is engaging with organisations and communities, policy makers and religious leaders in encouraging a dialogue and a better understanding of the issue. A key part of this is creating an environment where experiences and reflections can be exchanged.

The social mission of the Catholic Church

- In seeking to bring about a more just and equitable world (what many Christians would describe as the reign of God) it is vital to tackle issues of poverty, access to health and education resources as well as basic provisions, and unequal power relations – especially those between women and men.
- Progressio contributes to this social mission by working with people of all faiths and none in a respectful partnership. Progressio is not an official agency of the Catholic Church.

Progressio and the teaching of the Catholic Church

- In cases of a pandemic such as HIV the issue is about life or death. Any moral analysis has to go beyond personal sexual relations and understand the wider context of the life and death challenges and the unjust power relations between men and women.
- The Church insists that pastoral care and support of people with HIV must be done without judgement or prejudice. Of course, Progressio supports this.
- Progressio notes that sexual responsibility, fidelity and chastity are values in Church teaching which are important elements in a holistic approach to tackling HIV. Respect within relationships and mutual responsibility both contribute to greater equality, assisting in reducing HIV infection.
- The concern about Church teaching on condom use has moved the focus of the debate away from these underpinning values and fails to recognise power and gender inequalities.
- Progressio recognises that in certain circumstances the use of condoms is a life-saving option. An informed use of condoms should never be discounted.
- We, like many others, do not consider this position to be counter to Church teaching. There is a plurality of views from Church leaders and thinkers about the role of barrier methods and Progressio welcomes the debate. Examples include:
 - Church teaching includes an acceptance of a secondary effect (for instance the use of the contraceptive pill to regulate menstrual cycles, although also having a contraceptive effect, is acceptable).
 - Church teaching includes the concept of the lesser of two evils (in this instance death/condom use).

Working with other faiths

- Both Christian and Islamic teaching have a strong emphasis on caring for the sick and this is an important starting point in joint work on HIV.
- Our experience in the Islamic countries of Somaliland and Yemen show that religious leaders have a vital role in education, awareness raising and tackling discrimination in addressing HIV and AIDS among their communities.

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