U.S. Agency for International Development

Bureau for Global Health

SUCCESS STORIES

HIV/AIDS

Essay Contest Echoes Voices of Ethiopia's Young Generation

"IF YOU WERE PRESIDENT, what would you do to fight HIV/AIDS?"

That was the question posed in an essay contest for young listeners of *Mestawot*, a magazine radio program, produced by the Voice of America (VOA) Amharic Service. *Mestawot*, which means reflection in Amharic, received an impressive response of more than 2,300 letters and emails from all over Ethiopia, Eritrea, and even other countries.

The record-breaking response is an encouraging sign for Ethiopia, a country in which AIDS in the leading killer of young adults and its greatest threat.

Writing from college dorms, remote farming villages, and military outposts, respondents included high school students, refugees, soldiers, jail inmates, and listeners who faced special challenges to make their voices heard. They took their assignment seriously; one reply was 36 pages long.

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"VOA is my only solace … I can't live without radio," wrote Bizunesh Teshome, a seriously disabled 20-year-old woman from rural Ethiopia. Bizunesh, who taught herself how to read and write, penned her seven-page essay by kerosene lamp, saving her pennies for the oil and blocking out the taunts of her siblings. She then hobbled three hours on a crutch to mail her reply. Her answer? "Education is the key to overcome HIV/AIDS."

Although some listeners suggested harsh and discriminatory measures against people with HIV/AIDS, the majority composed thoughtful replies that offered hope for Ethiopia. Most listeners urged political leaders to take an active personal role in fighting AIDS through education and public communication. "As a leader, I'll be at the forefront of the anti-AIDS campaign," penned grand-prize winner Kemal Ahmed. "I'll make sure my people are aware of the impact of HIV/AIDS and encourage voluntary testing. And I'll be the first one to get tested!"

Other listeners stressed the importance of education, legal protections for girls and women from rape and harmful traditional practices, and learning lessons from other countries such as Uganda. Practical steps included free and confidential voluntary testing, legalizing HIV/AIDS drugs, and expanding recreational facilities and job training for young people. Above all, eradicating poverty was seen as critical to fighting AIDS.

Photo courtesy of VOA

From left to right: Konjit Taye, Fregenet Asseged, and Alula Kebede, hosts of VOA's Amharic Service *Mestawot* weekend youth magazine.

Mestawot is the Amharic Service's most popular program. The hour-long magazine show airs every other Sunday. It is set to popular music and is aimed at listeners 25 and under. The radio show features interviews with successful role models and musicians, stories of young people making a difference, and a regular AIDS "window". The 2002 contest, sponsored by VOA's AIDS office, was funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID).

The audience seems highly receptive to AIDS messages. In addition to the record-breaking response, fresh audience research in Ethiopia shows that after local news, HIV/AIDS is the subject most requested for VOA coverage. In addition, regional

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representatives of international agencies, including USAID, have hailed the Mestawot youth program for its positive impact on young people.

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