



UN Cares in Action

The Case of the Dominican Republic 2013

**Addressing HIV-related stigma and homophobia,
and reaching adolescents**

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Summary

Although not a 2012 UN Cares award winner, the UN Cares team in the Dominican Republic completed a number of activities with both UN staff and the children of UN staff to reduce stigma and discrimination while increasing HIV knowledge. Among UN staff members in the duty station, the UN Cares team with the help of LGBT, MSM, and PLHIV communities created knowledge sessions that would discourage HIV-related stigma and sexual minority discrimination. With 120 children of UN staff, the UN Cares focal points held discussions to teach HIV facts, to promote healthy sexual relationships among young adults, and to initiate open discussions between parents and their children about sexuality.

Background and Context

The island of Hispaniola, shared by Haiti and Dominican Republic, has the largest HIV prevalence outside of Africa. In the Dominican Republic, an estimated 44,000 people currently live with HIV, out of which approximately 41,000 are adults aged 15 and up. The total HIV prevalence is 0.70 per cent and the number of deaths due to AIDS stands at 1,700.

Both governmental and non-governmental groups have supported policy and programmes to protect key populations, nevertheless there are very few governmental policies in place to protect people living with HIV as well as to address key issues, such as stigma and discrimination towards people living with HIV and towards populations at risk, especially people from the sexual diversity groups and people who use drugs. Non-governmental agencies are supporting these highly stigmatized groups, and UN agencies look to these organizations to assist in facilitating activities and dialogue to reduce discrimination and stigma against lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered

(LGBT) populations, and ignorance regarding HIV.

In the Dominican Republic, FAO, IOM, UN Women, UNAIDS, UNDP, UNDSS, UNESCO, UNFPA, UNHCR, UNICEF, and WFP are present. Collectively, these organizations contribute to UN Cares, designed to offer HIV and AIDS resources, knowledge, and insight to UN personnel and their families.

UN Cares Structure/ Leadership of and Advocacy for UN Cares

The Dominican Republic UN Cares team is composed of one focal point from each resident agency (FAO, IOM, UN Women, UNAIDS, UNDP, UNDSS, UNESCO, UNFPA, UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP). Each focal point devotes his or her time and effort to promoting knowledge about HIV; prevention, response (for example through access to PEP starter kits), and addressing stigma and discrimination against at-risk populations, especially groups representing sexual diversity.

UN Cares has been active for several years, organizing events for UN Staff. It has focused on several areas of work, especially addressing issues of general knowledge about HIV and AIDS, bringing these issues to regular discussions with UN Staff. Although the scope of work of UN Cares has been as broad as mandated by the 10 Minimum Standards, given the possible prevalence and lack of general debate, the UN Cares team in the Dominican Republic decided to pay special attention to several specific issues. As a result of this, from as early as 2010, the Dominican Republic's UN Cares team was determined to focus on the deconstruction of HIV-related stigma from within the UN community. While addressing the 10 Minimum Standards and affirming UN Cares resources, the Dominican UN Cares started focusing on the issue of stigma and discrimination.

Although the Dominican Republic UN Cares team did not apply for the UN Cares award in 2012, their sessions with children of UN staff, and the consideration and utilization of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community to address stigma means they have innovative experiences to share with other UN Cares teams.

Source of Funding

Funding for activities originated from contributions of all resident agencies of the United Nations in Dominican Republic, with significant contributions from the Office of the Resident Coordinator. Each UN Cares focal point is responsible for requesting funds for jointly identified activities and reporting on the spending in relation to the approved workplan. In 2012, the Dominican Republic UN Cares team was allocated \$4,073 on the basis of voluntary contributions of UN Agencies.

UN Cares- Approaches adopted

In October 2011, the Dominican Republic's UN Cares team, with the support of an external facilitator, delivered three workshops to the Dominican Republic's UN staff. One hundred sixty people were in attendance. The three workshops

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introduced four Elements of HIV and AIDS comprehension: UN Cares 10 Minimum Standards, facilitated by the UN Cares team; prevention, modes of transmission, and male and female condom use, co-facilitated by UNAIDS; sexual and reproductive rights, facilitated by UNFPA; and stigma and discrimination, co-facilitated by UNDP. A special workshop, organized around the UN Cares campaign against discrimination was dedicated to the issue of stigma and discrimination. At the session, UN staff worked in a roundtable setting where they interacted with and learned from socially vulnerable populations such as men who have sex with men, transgender individuals, and people living with HIV. The individuals shared their life stories, incidents when their rights were violated, and how they individually addressed the discrimination and stigma they experience daily. UN staff members were allowed to ask questions and shared their support for those who had revealed their experiences. For the majority of UN staff, this was the first opportunity to interact with persons whom they knew were either HIV-positive or identified members of a stigmatized/discriminated population group. This session received very positive feedback; some stories even brought some of the UN staff to tears. The change of opinion and behavior was evident and revealed to UN Cares focal points by UN Staff members. UN Cares was congratulated on the approach and facilitation.

On World AIDS Day in December 2011 in coordination with the Interagency Group on HIV and AIDS, the Dominican Republic UN Cares began Outfest, an International Film Festival supporting the LGBT community. The UN Country Team supported the organization of this first LGBT film festival, as a space for discrimination-free and non-stigmatizing interaction between the LGBT community and UN staff. The Resident Coordinator, as well as the UNAIDS Country Coordinator in the country addressed the participants in the opening ceremony and reiterated their support to the cause against stigma and discrimination, including that related to HIV. At this particular World AIDS Day, members of the Dominican Republic UN Cares team stood at the entrance passing out fliers with the UNAIDS slogan of “Zero New Infections, Zero Discrimination and Zero AIDS-related Deaths.” Individuals attending the festival for the first time took a picture in the PHOTOCALL, a space with a UN Cares logo in the background, where all passing invitees and VIPs would stand and have their photos taken. The continued interest and support for sexually diverse groups was clear from the UN Staff participation. The invitation to the festival was publicized via UN System website and UN Facebook page, which allowed for the general public’s participation.

UN Cares continued to be very active and with the support of UN staff and Heads of Agencies, it also created workshops for children, friends, and family of UN staff. Thus far, two editions of these workshops have taken place, under the guidance of an external facilitator, a psychologist and sexologist, experienced in working with children of all age ranges on the issue of sexuality, sexual and reproductive health, HIV and other STIs, teen pregnancy, sexual abuse, sexual diversity and general sexual well-being. During both workshops,



80 per cent of participating children admitted that they do not discuss sexuality with their parents. The children talk with friends or search the Internet for answers. The participants demonstrated an incredible interest to learn and interact in a space full of confidence, respect, and mutual recognition.

In its second edition (encouraged by children and UN Staff parents), in August 2012, three separate workshops were conducted for adolescents aged 11 through 22, and a discussion was held for children aged 7-11 years old on general life skills. Each workshop has been adapted to different age groups, so that children who participated in the first edition could take part in more “advanced” groups.

Within the workshops for adolescents aged 11-22, a total of 110 children participated, which included children of UN Staff, security guards and policemen on UN premises, and children of the relatives of UN Staff from rural areas. Children received promotional material about UN Cares, participation certificates, and developed a video that was distributed to parents. The adolescents also completed individual surveys on the workshops. The topics discussed with the children were work discrimination, sexual diversity, sexuality, HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs). The topic of sexual diversity made an impression on the adolescents who participated. Thus, that portion of the workshop was positively evaluated. A space for confidence and mutual trust has been created, where even one of the participants openly admitted he feels bisexual, which was received positively by all participants, welcoming his openness and showing him their support. The UN Cares members leading the session addressed the topics of sexual orientation and gender identity in a most non-stigmatizing and non-discriminatory way.

The facilitator also invited young people — volunteers living with HIV — to the workshop. These individuals participated in the workshop without revealing their status as any other participant and at the end of the workshop revealed their status. This has created a very positive impact, young people understanding how others feel when being discriminated or stigmatized (as they shared their personal stories) and showed a very positive reception.

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Monitoring and Evaluation:

For the adolescent groups, participants were asked to fill out surveys to record their impressions and opinions of the workshop. The questions were:

- How valuable was the workshop for you?
- What did you like about the workshop?
- What did you dislike about the workshop?
- What then would you have liked to develop further?
- What did you think of the facilitator (teacher)?
- What was the most important thing you learned in the workshop?
- Do you think what you learned will serve you for your future?

A total of 90 adolescents answered the survey; their results were reorganized in three age categories: 11-14, 15-17 and 18-22. The survey analysis shows that the participants appreciated the session. The answers outlined that the adolescents agreed that the workshop was extremely valuable; they appreciated their facilitator; and they defined learning how to protect against STIs as the most valuable topic in session. When considering what topics they would have wished to develop further, adolescents had mixed answers. Some believed it was stigma, or more knowledge on HIV and AIDS, while others wished to learn more about discrimination against the LGBT community, health and wellness, and how to have safer sexual relationships. All in all, adolescents left the sessions with great knowledge on HIV and AIDS, STIs, and safer sexual practices.

Strengths:

- The use of surveys with adolescent workshops provided data on what sections of the lessons were new, challenging, positive, and significant for the adolescents.
- UN staff interaction with highly stigmatized groups. From the first sessions in 2010, the UN Cares team immediately involved individuals from the LGBT community and individuals in the HIV positive community.

Barriers:

- The UN Cares team in the Dominican Republic has always had the support of agency Representatives and the Resident Coordinator in all activities and initiatives but funds continue to be a concern.
- After the workshop for children, a session was organized for the parents of the children and the facilitator of the workshop. The facilitator presented conclusions (in a very confidential manner) and recommendations to parents to discuss with their children issues related to sexual diversity, HIV and AIDS, teen pregnancy, and more. Unfortunately, UN Cares can only offer suggestions; it is up to the parents to actually implement them.

Advice to other UN Cares teams

We encourage all groups attempting UN Cares activities to focus on some aspect of sexual diversity. Civil society organizations in each country can positively affect and support UN Cares activities. In this way, all activities will be more comprehensive and will answer the needs of each country.

When organizing these events, it is great to have the support of Heads of Agencies, who provide leadership. Open and clear discussions are key, especially when directly meeting with members of groups that experience from stigma and discrimination.

When addressing activities to the children of staff, it is also important to address their parents with complementary messages.

Future Project/Plans

It is important to keep in mind the focus of sexual diversity in all initiatives and future activities.

Sources

- “AIDSinfo: Dominican Republic.” (2011) Address: <http://www.unaids.org/en/regionscountries/countries/dominicanrepublic/>
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- Alicia Sanchez (personal communication, August 2013)
- Jan Nemecek (personal communication, August 2013)
- “UN Cares Youth and Adolescent Workshop-Evaluation” (2012)

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