

Bridging the gap between research, policies and interventions
3rd Social Aspects of HIV/AIDS Research Alliance Conference
Dakar, Senegal
October 10-14, 2005

Article by Sarah Pugh* as published in CASID November 2005 newsletter

In the melting humidity of a West African October, the 3rd African conference of the Social Aspects of HIV/AIDS Research Alliance (SAHARA), October 10-14, brought together over 325 people in Dakar, Senegal, under the theme "Bridging the gap between research, policies and interventions." SAHARA, a young and growing research alliance of African-based partners, is geared towards using social sciences research that can inform programmes and policies to prevent the further spread of HIV in sub-Saharan Africa, and through multi-site, multi-country best practice, to mitigate the effects of the current epidemic.

SAHARA partners in West, Southern and East and Central Africa were involved in the conceptualization and planning of the Dakar conference, which was designed to move away from a traditional conference of presenters and audience towards a more interactive, skills-based approach. To this end, capacity-building workshops were held each day around various themes, such as how to conduct research around sensitive issues, and how to integrate a Gender-Based Analysis into one's own work. As well, a series of thematic seminars called "Exchange Encounters" were held every afternoon, to bring participants and communities together in open, facilitated dialogue, with the intent of brainstorming research gaps and future directions for research.

One of the most talked-about sessions of the conference was an Exchange Encounter on sexual identities, chaired by three young men from a local Men Who Have Sex With Men (MSM) association. In a West African context, this open dialogue on the subject of sexual identity and homosexuality was seen by many as a "watershed" in terms of putting these issues on the table. Policy-makers, religious leaders, researchers and civil society representatives were asked by the chairs to set aside moral questions, prejudices and discomforts for the purposes of the discussion, and to focus instead on how to address this particular HIV/AIDS-related issue. Discussions and future research recommendations derived from all Exchange Encounters were compiled and presented in the conference's closing plenary address.

Both the difficulties and the significant rewards of organizing and developing pan-African partnerships across regional, ethnic and religious divides were exemplified in many ways through the 3rd African SAHARA conference. The critical challenges of formulating and implementing appropriate, African-centred responses to the HIV/AIDS epidemic will be taken forward over the next year, with the 4th SAHARA conference scheduled for Nairobi, Kenya in early 2007. (www.sahara.org.za)

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Workshop materials:

[Gender and HIV/AIDS: The Nuts and Bolts of Gender-Based Analysis](#) (Includes the scenarios used in the workshop)

[Gender-Based Analysis and HIV/AIDS: Checklist](#)