

Title: **Reaching out to HIV/AIDS high risk groups: USAID and Peace Corps join hands**

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Department: **Health**

Description: **USAID Mali, through Population Services International (PSI), and Peace Corps Mali collaborate to educate truck workers and sex workers on the reality and prevention of HIV/AIDS**

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Geographic area: **Bamako**

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Content:

On any given day in the heart of Mali's capital, Bamako, an endless stream of trucks from all over West Africa passes through. Accompanying these trucks, carrying goods from all over the region, are the drivers and their apprentices who arrive from Nigeria, Burkina Faso, Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Togo, Ghana, and Niger, in addition to those from interior regions of Mali. Upon arrival in Bamako's truck stops, these truckers must wait long periods at a time, sometimes weeks on end, to receive clearance to unload their goods and head out to their next destination. To pass the time, they often take to playing cards and drinking tea under the under carriage of their truck beds to avoid the stifling midday heat. But as night falls many of these men, who have been away from their wives and girlfriends, find new and temporary sexual partners. These truckers and their partners make up one of Mali's highest risk groups for contracting HIV/AIDS. With funding from USAID Mali, Population Services International Mali (PSI/Mali), Peace Corps Mali, and Groupe Pivot Santé Population have begun an innovative collaborative project to directly reach out to the thousands of truckers who pass through Mali's capital.

While the HIV/AIDS prevalence in Mali is considered to be low in comparison to its West African neighbors, with a national prevalence rate of 1.2% according to the most recent Demographic and Health Survey conducted in 2006, Bamako accounts for the highest rate of infection and there is risk that this will spread from the high risk groups to the general population. In 2003, the HIV prevalence rate among truck workers was 3.9% and 31.9% among the women who frequently become sexual partners of these men. Although many education and mass media campaigns on the dangers of HIV/AIDS have been launched throughout the region, there is still a need to reach out directly to those with higher risk behaviors.

In order to better reach these high risk groups, USAID Mali through PSI/Mali and Peace Corps have sent a team of volunteers to these truck stops to personally relay HIV/AIDS prevention messages. The Peace Corps Volunteers, Kimberly Mason, Tosi Ogunyoku and Melinda Rizley, previously served in Guinea, and have the advantage of both a broader knowledge of the region and of speaking French in addition to English, allowing them the unique opportunity to relate to and, interact with both the Anglophone and Francophone drivers who pass through Mali.

These three Peace Corps Volunteers have reached over 2,000 men and women with HIV/AIDS prevention messages, including the importance of getting tested, in the first 4 months of activities. The volunteers have been able to engage in direct dialogue with many individuals, relaying the information about prevention that is often quite challenging due to the many myths and taboos surrounding HIV/AIDS.

“Is AIDS real?” is a frequently posed question. Many in West Africa still believe AIDS is a hoax to discourage people from engaging in sexual relations or a marketing gimmick to encourage people to purchase condoms. This coupled with the belief that there are traditional medicinal cures for HIV/AIDS and/or that only loose-women use condoms, leads many to ignore the messages surrounding the practice of safer sex. To combat these myths and taboos, an essential element of the Volunteers’ work is to devise creative tools to address these issues.

Humor provides an easy avenue to initiate a discussion on such a serious and sometimes uncomfortable topic and it is not uncommon to hear laughter while the Volunteers are conducting group activities. Using a PSI/Mali flip chart, the Volunteers often initiate a conversation by showing the groups an image of truckers who are watching women pass by. Upon viewing this image, laughter often resonates from within the group due to the familiarity of the scene. The Volunteers then ask the group to create a story of what they expect will happen next. Almost always the story involves a sexual encounter between the man and the women, often without a condom because the man believes a condom will not be pleasurable, the condom will give him a disease or the woman herself does not want to use it. In response to these statements, the Volunteers point out the consequences of these actions and then provide the audience with safer options. Since many have never used a condom, this involves demonstrating proper condom usage, using a wooden penis, which often generates a roar of laughter from the group.

Sharing knowledge from among the group participants themselves also provides a means of getting the message across. Often there are participants in the group who are well informed on the topic of HIV/AIDS and these participants are encouraged to speak up so that the other participants in the group can have a better understanding of the topic in their own local language. These participants also help discredit the myths and taboos which surround the disease by explaining to the groups how HIV/AIDS has affected their communities and what measures people are taking to prevent it spreading. These individuals who are well informed not only provide a valuable contribution to the conversation but also ensure that a good source of information rests in the community.

Discrediting the myths and the taboos surrounding AIDS is one of the most fundamental aspects of USAID’s work in partnership with the Volunteers. Because these beliefs are shared among a wide range of the population, it is essential that the Volunteers are able to share their experiences with other Malians who can continue to deliver these messages. To create this sustainable system of communication, the Volunteers have collaborated with the peer educators from the Malian NGO AMIFA one of the NGOs working with Groupe Pivot Santé Population HIV/AIDS prevention. The Volunteers have worked along side the AMIFA peer educators to assist them in finding new strategies to engage in dialogue pertaining to HIV/AIDS outreach. This is especially important among the female population, who generally only speak the local language, Bambara. The HIV/AIDS prevention campaign still has a long way to go in Mali, but with the continued efforts of organizations and individuals who are committed to educating the population, the spread of the slowed can be slowed one individual at a time.



Photo caption: Ivorian truck workers with a PSI image book at the Faladie truck station  
Photo by: Tosi A. Ogunyoku



Peace Corps Mali volunteers Melinda and Kim at the border town of Senou with AMIFA peer educators

Photo by: Tosi A. Ogunyoku



Photo caption: Peace Corps Mali volunteer Tosi with  
truck workers from Ghana at the Faladie truck station  
Photo by: Kimberly Mason