

challenging the ongoing practices of colonisation

an interview
with
Lester Chitsulu

As Lester Chitsulu, the Manager of the National AIDS Control Program in Lilongwe, describes below, trying to find ways to address the spread and effects of HIV/AIDS involves challenging the ongoing effects and practices of colonisation. The following interview took place at the National AIDS Control Program in Lilongwe in August 1996.

We are not the same people as our grandparents were. We live in two worlds. Some of us are totally westernised, some not at all. The people who are literate in this country, like myself, all went through mission schools and then Western training and we are often more conservative than those in the villages. Having been trained into Western ways of thinking, trying not to let our training get in the way of seeing other ways can be difficult.

We are trying to find the cultural traditions that once were working. Having outside countries and organisations come in has meant that communities and chiefs and the

people's own solutions have not been utilised. Volunteers from other countries come into communities with very different ideas about what should be occurring. They have very different understandings.

One of the big problems is that money has been thrown at the problem from outside and often this has meant that communities haven't been encouraged to address the issues themselves - it is disempowering of the community. It also means we have thousands of posters for a largely illiterate country! There has been very little work done around social needs or ways of working, but there have been thousands of medical studies driven by Western universities.

Christianity has played a big part. Especially in trying to shame people about sex and sexuality - to think that all kinds of sex are bad. People often do not disclose that they are HIV positive because there has been a lot of stigma from the belief that promiscuity causes AIDS. Many approaches to AIDS prevention focus on trying to encourage people to be celibate. But this will only work for those who have never had sex! Those who don't know its pleasures!

Since Christianity has challenged polygamy, it has also meant that there has been an increase in casual sex. Polygamous marriages were formal affairs, and changing this tradition has also affected inheritance laws and the structures of families. We were just approached by a Mission agency to run a STD clinic in which there was a proviso that they would treat the symptoms but they wouldn't

provide condoms, that people would have to go across the road to get them. It's just crazy.

This is a poor country but attitudes from the rich are seeping in. In even the most remote villages there is coca cola, young girls wanting their hair in certain ways, and everyone knows the moon-walk. How can everyone know Michael Jackson? There are very few ways to get the material possessions that are being constantly encouraged - and for young girls having sex for materials, or even just for sustenance, is a major problem.

We are so used to outsiders telling us that the reason AIDS is so bad here is because we are backward, or because of our cultural practices. I mean, there are practices within our culture that encourage the spread of HIV, just as there are in other countries and cultures, but there are also practices that minimise it and we must tap into those. In village life once it was not possible to go around sleeping with everyone's daughter - you simply wouldn't have got away with it. We lived in this land for thousands of years at one with the land. How to tap into the older traditions will be a challenge.

There is the potential for the mobilisation of villagers here and to build on Malawian solutions to this epidemic. There are patches here and there. Let us hope that one day there will be a quilt showing ways forward.

