

KEY SUCCESSES OF THE TORONTO YOUTHFORCE AND AIDS 2006 YOUTH PROGRAMME

A. Background

Since its foundation at AIDS 2002 in Barcelona, the YouthForce has played a pivotal role in keeping youth issues on the agenda. The 2002 and 2004 YouthForces were successful in increasing the number of youth participants and raising their visibility, showcasing youth-adult partnerships, and getting young people on planning committees. The 2006 Toronto YouthForce¹ continued to build upon past successes, and added new elements: expanded youth activities and initiatives through close coordination with the Local Host Youth Programme; a highly-successful advocacy and media campaign; and the creation of a Commitments Desk to encourage leaders to concretely commit to working with young people.

Due to the efforts of the Toronto YouthForce and the AIDS 2006 Youth Programme, the XVI International AIDS Conference (AIDS 2006) witnessed an explosion in numbers of young delegates and a sharp increase in meaningful youth participation throughout the Conference. AIDS 2006 also marked the institutionalization of youth issues within the Conference Organization structure, through the creation of a Youth Advisory Committee and a Local Host Youth Programme. The inclusion of youth at this level led to greater youth-focused programming at the AIDS 2006 as well as meaningful dialogue between youth and adult leaders. The YouthForce and Youth Programme helped young people move away from issues focused solely on youth participation toward substantive issues such as the need for comprehensive HIV prevention.

With half of all new HIV infections occurring in young people under the age of 25, there is a critical need for global and regional advocacy efforts to keep youth issues, especially those surrounding HIV prevention in the developing world, on the table. The objectives of the Toronto YouthForce were:

- To facilitate the collaboration of stakeholders committed to youth HIV/AIDS issues at the Conference.
- To empower young people from both developing and developed countries to be effective participants in the Conference.
- To promote youth participation and inclusion of youth issues in the mainstream conference agenda, in press generated from the Conference and in HIV/AIDS programmes and policies in general.
- To gain and achieve international and individual commitments which promote youth leadership and mitigate the impact of HIV/AIDS on young people.

B. Results

1. Institutionalization of a youth programme within the International AIDS Conference and expansion of YouthForce initiatives
 - **Increased youth participation in the International AIDS Conference Local Host secretariat and programme structure:** A Local Host Youth Coordinator and five additional Youth Programme staff were hired, and a Youth Advisory Committee was formed to provide input into programming. Young people were selected for all Conference planning committees and one young person presented as a plenary speaker. Through these ground-breaking initiatives, the YouthForce was able to collaborate extensively with the Local Host Youth Programme, and to become part of the official Conference programme for the first time.
 - **Increased numbers of youth scholarships:** More scholarships were awarded to young people than ever before at an International AIDS Conference. At AIDS 2004, 100 youth scholarships were awarded; this year there were 145 international and 239 Canadian scholarship recipients.

¹ The Toronto YouthForce is a wide-ranging coalition of non-governmental and international organizations, coordinated by Family Health International, the Global Youth Coalition on HIV/AIDS, TakingITGlobal, and Advocates for Youth. The YouthForce worked in close partnership with the AIDS 2006 Local Host Youth Programme, and was supported by UNFPA, UNAIDS, UNICEF, the Summit Foundation, UNESCO, CIDA, MAC AIDS Fund, and Levi's.

- **Reduced registration fees and expanded age range:** In part due to efforts of previous YouthForces, conference organizers drastically lowered registration fees to \$150 USD for non-OECD countries (compared to \$550 for adults) and \$200 for OECD countries (compared to \$750 for adults). In addition, the age range for youth delegates was expanded from 18-24 to 16-25. Sixty delegates at the Conference were under age 18.
- **Increased number of youth delegates:** Young people attended AIDS 2006 in record numbers, far surpassing past records: at AIDS 2006 there were over 1,000 youth delegates, more than double the number at AIDS 2004. This can be compared to 50 youth at AIDS 2000, 200 youth at AIDS 2002 and 450 youth at AIDS 2004. In order to boost the number of young people at the Conference, the YouthForce introduced the "Take Two to Toronto" campaign to encourage organizations and governments worldwide to sponsor youth. As a result, an additional 117 youth, sponsored by 31 organizations, attended the Conference.
- **Enlarged Youth Pre-Conference:** The Toronto YouthForce, in collaboration with the AIDS 2006 Youth Programme, organized a Youth Pre-Conference for 236 young people from around the world. The Pre-Conference provided young people with information and skills in advocacy, media and communications, prevention technologies, trade justice and treatment access, research, and monitoring and evaluation. Youth participants credited the Pre-Conference with preparing them to fully participate in the Conference while providing a forum for networking with peers and experts in the field.
- **Highlighted Youth Opening and Reception:** The Youth Opening and Reception kicked off the Conference week. Held at the Olympic Spirit Toronto Centre, the party was attended by over 1,000 guests. Special guests included Keep a Child Alive Co-Founder and Goodwill Ambassador Alicia Keys, UNAIDS Executive Director Dr. Peter Piot, Bob Haas, Chairman, Levi Strauss & Co, and Craig McClure, Executive Director, International AIDS Society.
- **Expanded youth-focused sessions and presenters:** Over 40 young people presented abstract sessions, poster presentations, and skills building workshops and/or moderated sessions. This included 18 youth-specific sessions in the Conference programme, youth opening and closing sessions. As part of the Toronto YouthForce, the Global Youth Coalition on HIV/AIDS (GYCA) facilitated e-courses to prepare young people for the Conference; of the 94 young people who participated, 65 submitted abstracts and session proposals with a 35% acceptance rate.
- **Enhanced opportunities to reach young people:** Youth morning orientation sessions commenced with an opening orientation on Sunday and continued daily. These breakfast meetings provided an overview of key sessions and a space to ask questions and learn more about the advocacy messages and tools available to youth. In addition, a "Youth Pocket Guide to Navigating International AIDS Conferences" was developed and given to all youth delegates at the Pre-Conference and Youth Pavilion, providing background information, advocacy and networking strategies, and young people's personal testimonies.
- **Showcased youth space - Youth Pavilion/TYF Booth:** The Youth Pavilion, housed within the Global Village, was a youth-focused space to showcase youth achievements, facilitate networking opportunities, provide a youth media hub, and continue the momentum from the Youth Pre-Conference. Forty sessions were held throughout the conference, including lively performances using music, theatre, and film. The Pavilion was hailed as one of the most interactive and engaging spaces within the entire Conference. The Toronto YouthForce Booth in the Youth Pavilion made available t-shirts, condoms, posters, fact sheets, postcards, and information about other youth events (*see Advocacy section below*).
- **Enhanced Web Outreach through the AIDS 2006 Youth Site:** The official youth website (<http://youth.aids2006.org>) served as a clearinghouse of information on all youth-related activities leading up to and during AIDS 2006 for youth, adults and media. The website featured articles, blogs, podcasts and articles by YouthForce journalists and youth delegates. In addition to the AIDS 2006 Youth Mentors Online discussion boards and other helpful resources, the AIDS 2006 Youth Site provided an invaluable tool for helping young people at the Conference stay connected, and helping those back home feel part of AIDS 2006.

- **Youth Rapporteur Team:** AIDS 2006 marked the first time a Rapporteur Team was dedicated entirely to recording the proceedings and ground-breaking presentations at the conference from a youth perspective. The Toronto YouthForce and Youth Programme selected and collaborated with the Rapporteur Team. At the official Conference closing, the team presented to 5,000 Conference delegates on youth issues and involvement at the Conference, including reinforcing the TYF key messages. The youth rapporteur report will form part of the official Conference record.

2. High impact advocacy and media campaigns

- **Effective Toronto YouthForce Advocacy Campaign:** The Toronto YouthForce launched a Conference-wide advocacy campaign, focusing on the following key messages based on a 3-week e-consultation with 218 youth from 36 countries:

LISTEN: Involve us in decision making that affects our lives

MONEY: We need fully-funded programs to protect ourselves

SEX: HIV is mainly spread through sex. We need access to condoms to protect ourselves

TRUTH: We need comprehensive sex education to protect ourselves

ACCESS: We need youth-friendly health services, including prevention, treatment, voluntary counseling and testing, and access to harm reduction programs

The YouthForce broadcast these messages at the Conference through eye-popping t-shirts, large posters, and postcards urging leaders to visit the Commitments desk. The entire 600,000 square foot conference venue was "postered", garnering the YouthForce the highest visibility of any Conference-wide advocacy campaign. As a testament to the YouthForce advocacy campaign's visibility and impact, Dr. Peter Piot, Executive Director of UNAIDS, remarked, "I know more about the YouthForce than anything else at the Conference." The materials are on view at <http://youth.aids2006.org/en/action/>. Youth delegates used the materials, messages, and extensive advocacy training to engage decision-makers in dialogue resulting in concrete commitments to scaling up HIV/AIDS interventions for and with young people. The advocacy campaign was a clear success, as a wide range of Conference delegates were impressed with the impact of the messaging, and noted the effects of the Campaign.

- **Expanded Toronto YouthForce Media Campaign:** For the first time in the Conference history, a YouthForce Media Team, consisting of 11 youth journalists from around the world, provided excellent coverage of the conference via articles, blogs, podcasts, press conferences, and a video documentary. Youth spokespeople, trained as part of the YouthForce media team, gave dozens of radio and TV interviews that aired on national radio and international media including MTV, CBC, and CNN, providing wide coverage to the YouthForce and youth HIV/AIDS issues. The media team produced 40 podcasts, 140 blog entries in French, Spanish and English, 30 articles in English and French, and a press release and 6 media advisories; distributed 270 press kits; and wrote 3 articles for the youth column of the AIDS 2006 daily newspaper. The media showed high interest in the young people attending the Conference and youth HIV/AIDS issues. For example, over 7 major media outlets each day visited the Youth Pavilion.
- **Continued partnership with MTV:** The Toronto YouthForce Media Team blogged and wrote over 30 entries and articles for the MTV Staying Alive website. In addition, the AIDS 2006 Youth Programme and Toronto YouthForce partnered with MTV on 48Fest, a 48 hour filmmaking competition by MTV's Staying Alive. Eight teams of six youth filmmakers were challenged to write, shoot and edit a whole film in just two days. The films were screened and judged by a distinguished panel at the "forty|eight|fest" awards ceremony.

3. Real Commitments Made from Leaders and Partners

- **Garnered concrete commitments - Youth-Adults Commitments Desk:** The Youth-Adult Commitments Desk was an unprecedented initiative which marked a step forward in ensuring accountability for promises made to young people and generated a great deal of buzz. It provided an opportunity for adult delegates to visit and interact with young people. Featured prominently in the Youth Pavilion, the Commitments Desk

garnered 344 concrete, time-bound commitments to youth (some of which are highlighted on <http://youth.aids2006>). Members of existing global youth networks will follow up with leaders to ensure that promises are kept. A monitoring plan will be put in place to ensure that commitments are implemented and consequently, highlighted at the XVII International AIDS Conference in Mexico in 2008.

Notable Commitments:

- "I commit to ensuring that the UN system will get its act together and respond cohesively to safeguard the rights of young people. I will promote inclusion of young people at the decision-making table in issues that affect their lives. I will also start a youth internship program at UNAIDS" - Dr. Peter Piot, Executive Director and Under-Secretary General of UNAIDS
- "For AIDS 2008 in Mexico, I commit to double the number of young people" - The Honorable Dr. Frenk, Minister of Health (Mexico)
- "I commit to empower youth directly in the decision-making process at City Hall, including in preparation for Mexico City AIDS 2008" - David Miller, Mayor for City of Toronto (Canada)
- "I commit to allocate WHO resources and priorities to make information and knowledge available to young people, including young people living with HIV/AIDS, and making health service youth friendly" - Anders Nordstrom, Acting Director General of WHO

- *Moved beyond words - Youth Leadership Forum:* "From Rhetoric to Action," a High-Level Youth Leadership Forum, featured a dialogue between global leaders and 12 youth leaders from around the world. Global leaders included Dr. Peter Piot, the First Lady of Honduras Xiomara Castro de Zelaya, Canadian Minister of International Cooperation the Honourable Josée Verner, and Chairman of the NAACP Julian Bond. During the forum young people discussed issues of pressing concern to them such as the need for comprehensive HIV prevention.

C. Impact

The YouthForce, together with the AIDS 2006 Youth Programme, made a substantial impact on AIDS 2006 -- on the International AIDS Conference structure and programme, on young people, and on leaders and partners. Continuing the work of past YouthForces, youth participation moved from being "outside" the mainstream conference, to being incorporated into Conference planning and programme, through the institutionalization of a youth programme. The YouthForce model, remarked upon highly by many delegates, highlighted the effectiveness of youth-adult partnerships. Young people participating in the YouthForce and the Conference increased their skills and capacity enormously. Furthermore, the focus not only on youth participation issues, but also on substantive key messages developed and advocated by young people themselves, made a real impact on leaders and partners, as they recognized that young people have something meaningful to contribute.

D. Beyond Toronto: What's next?

The Toronto YouthForce coordinating team (Family Health International, Advocates for Youth, Global Youth Coalition on HIV/AIDS, and TakingITGlobal) are currently drafting a final report documenting experiences and lessons learned, and devising a plan for next steps and sustainability. Delegates have also been invited to join the Global Youth Coalition on HIV/AIDS, an initiative stemming from the Barcelona and Bangkok YouthForces.

Over 1,000 young leaders made their voices heard at the Toronto IAC. It is impossible to document all of their experiences, but for detailed information and coverage of youth events and initiatives, please visit <http://youth.aids2006.org>.