



## Tonata PLWHA Network & Positive Speaking

Tonata PLWHA (People Living with HIV and AIDS) Network is a network of support groups for people affected and infected by HIV and AIDS. ‘Tonata’ means “Open Your Eyes” in Oshiwambo.

The network started on July 30<sup>th</sup> 2008. It has been founded and run by people affected by HIV and AIDS who identified the serious need to harmonize their activities. Tonata PLWHA Network forms a web of solidarity of 250 associations or support groups, representing 8000 people living with HIV and AIDS in North and Central regions of Namibia (Omusati, Oshana, Oshana, Oshana, Oshikoto).

Tonata PLWHA Network aims to respond to the needs of its members in terms of access to adequate services from providers and government. Tonata registers and helps support groups structures in their community. In 2010 Tonata started this HIV Prevention Project targeting young people in Namibian schools, making use of the **Positive Speaking** methodology. In collaboration with UNESCO. Working at the grassroots level, Tonata feels responsible to give a clear and common voice to those people living with or affected by HIV. Through this **Positive Speaking** project, Tonata members have been contributing to the education response to HIV and AIDS, and have felt meaningfully involved in related HIV prevention efforts. Tonata PLWHA network will continue to work in this direction, together with its many partners and supporters throughout Namibia.

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HIV prevention interventions with young people in schools through

## Positive Speaking Methodology



Young people need to be empowered with positive messages about HIV prevention, gender equality, and sexual and reproductive health.

**Positive Speaking** is an innovative methodology that promotes dialogue, contributes to increasing levels of knowledge on HIV, encourages safe behaviours, builds self-esteem and hope. The methodology conveys messages that are tailored to the needs of learners who are affected by HIV and AIDS, and addresses stigma and discrimination against people living with HIV.

## The need for reinvigorating HIV & AIDS prevention in school

The recent release of research results on HIV and AIDS knowledge tests, conducted in several countries in Southern Africa, show that the level of knowledge about HIV and AIDS amongst young children (Grade 6) is of an inadequate level. In Namibia, only 36 % of pupils reached the minimal knowledge level and only 6 % of pupils reached some desirable level. Other research results show that among Namibian youth (15-24 years) an average of only 60 % can demonstrate accurate and sufficient knowledge about ways to protect themselves from acquiring HIV.

These outcomes are worrisome given the serious human, social and development challenges caused by HIV and AIDS and the massive amount of efforts that has been devoted to large-scale prevention programmes.

The time has come to re-think HIV prevention in educational institutions, and to pilot new interventions for children and youth, that address the knowledge gap and help young people to make informed decisions and adopt safe behaviours.

### Positive speaker experience

*“The positive speaking methodology was different compared to others. It involved gauging learners perceptions towards HIV and AIDS and people living with it. It also empowered learners to make the right decisions when it comes to relationships and sex.”*



## An innovative intervention

The **‘Positive Speaking’** methodology is educational and participatory, engaging into a non-judgmental and open dialogue with learners about HIV and AIDS. It consists of school visits with about 2-hour sessions per classroom, which are facilitated by experienced and trained young facilitators. During the pilot phase in 2010, learners’ levels of knowledge have been monitored by pre- and post-intervention questionnaires, evidencing that learners benefited significantly from the discussions as they learn new facts about HIV and AIDS, become more conscious on their own vulnerability, on how to protect themselves and support people living with HIV and AIDS at school, within their families and in their own community. Learners and teachers acknowledged the added value of interacting with someone who is openly living with HIV. The interventions also created a continuum of prevention, care and support through facilitating referrals and offering support to those who are affected.



## ‘Positive Speaking’ by people living openly and positively with HIV

All visits are facilitated by young people who have been openly and positively living with HIV for about 11 years. Facilitators’ HIV positive status is revealed at the end of the intervention. Their testimonies about living with HIV opens the beneficiaries’ eyes and touch their lives. For most of them, **Positive Speaking** is ‘putting a face on HIV’ and increasing their level of

### Learner experience

*“I learned a lot. I actually did not care before. I had a small mind, made up out of fear. I feel so sorry for the people I have offended. I now realize I have to take care of my brothers and sisters living with HIV and take care of myself. It made me realize anybody can get HIV if you don’t take care of yourself, abuse alcohol and drugs or sleep around with different partners.”*

awareness and understanding on HIV and AIDS related issues. They can easily relate to the stories and experiences of the facilitators and are encouraged to take informed decisions about their future choices and behaviours. Learners living with HIV also find it beneficial as it empowers them to live positively with HIV.

## Our experience of ‘Positive Speaking’

In July 2010, Tonata PLWHA Network implemented the **Positive Speaking** project throughout **40** schools in the four North and central regions of Namibia (Oshana, Omusati, Oshikoto and Ohangwena), reaching about **1762** learners. The facilitators realized, through pre-intervention questionnaires, that the level of knowledge on HIV and AIDS is still average and that the learning needs of many young people are still largely unmet. The outcomes of the **Positive Speaking** project were tremendous:

- Learners acknowledged to have become more conscious on how to protect themselves and on how to treat people living with HIV, recommending also that **Positive Speaking** should reach all learners in Namibia.
- Although information and education materials on HIV and AIDS is widely spread, the impact of the dialogue through positive speakers was incomparable.
- Learners felt empowered with knowledge and changed their perceptions on HIV and AIDS, or even felt the urgent need to take action about their life in terms of testing or joining support groups.
- Facilitators learned through **Positive Speaking** that more efforts need to be made to alert the community on the continuous spread of HIV and AIDS as poverty, peer pressure and poor communication in relationships continue to fuel HIV infections and increase stigma within communities and among young people.

### Teacher experience

*“My learners had been talking openly about HIV after the positive speakers visited our school. You see them sometimes in groups discussing about HIV to themselves. The methodology was useful”*

## Recommendations for the way forward

The **‘Positive Speaking’** methodology is not yet another intervention about HIV and AIDS in schools, but a meaningful new contribution to the education sector response to HIV and AIDS. It is recommended that all schools be encouraged to call upon Tonata and its partners for delivering similar interventions for the benefit of their learners, on an annual basis.



## Why ‘Positive Speaking’?

Although a lot of information about HIV and AIDS is being given to communities and schools by different stakeholders, new HIV infections are still being recorded in Namibia, especially among young people. This can be attributed to alcohol and drug abuse, early sexual debut, intergenerational sex, multiple concurrent partnerships, poverty, transactional sex, inconsistent condom use, misconceptions about HIV and AIDS, and negative attitudes towards people living with HIV that discourage many of them from revealing their positive status to their families, friends and partners. Moreover, educators traditionally lack the necessary skills, confidence, and attitudes required to deliver quality HIV prevention programmes, leading to pupils’ common perceptions of being ‘lectured’ about HIV prevention and safe behaviours rather than being engaged into some open dialogue around sexuality issues, what tends to reinforce the ‘AIDS fatigue’ syndrome. Finally, most programmes usually ignore the unique needs of learners and young people affected by HIV and AIDS.

## ‘Positive Speaking’ and the prevention revolution

Drawing on the unique experience of young adults who are living with HIV and AIDS, **Positive Speaking** aims to contribute to the HIV prevention revolution in Namibia, and more specifically:

- To empower young people and learners with appropriate knowledge and skills about HIV prevention, gender and sexual reproductive health, based on the drivers of the current HIV epidemic, so that they can make the right decisions in future about their relationships and enjoy healthy lives.
- To change learners’ risk perceptions towards HIV infection, and their attitudes towards people living with HIV.
- To provide learners who are affected by HIV and AIDS with hope, skills, confidence and necessary referral systems to access relevant services.