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Education on Community Health and Environment Conservation (ECHEC)

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JONAH KIPNG'ENO ROTICH
ECHEC,
P.O. Box 126,
K E R I C H O .
K E N Y A .

7TH FEBRUARY, 2000

Dear Sandra,

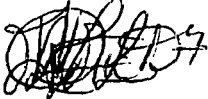
Firstly, we should commend you and the people of the United States of America in general for the concerted efforts you have put in trying to combat the deadly scourge, Aids, that has now reached pandemic heights. Your recent visit to our country Kenya punctuated the global concern as pertains the alarming spread of the disease and the urgent need to lay down a comprehensive, co-ordinated strategy to combat the disease. We really thank you for the visit.

As the Chairman, it is my pleasure to introduce our organisation to you. ECHEC (Education on community Health and Environment conservation) is a community, based organisation with its headquarters in Kericho. It is an umbrella organisation to a number of youth and women self-help groups in Kericho and Nandi Districts. Most of these groups are based in the rural areas. Our themes are basic education, community health, Environment Conservation, poverty alleviation, income generation among others. With emphasis placed on mass education, we aim at addressing these themes in the rural areas.

Madam, as an AIDS/HIV/STD Programme, ECHEC has proposed to undertake the challenging endeavour to educate the rural folk on all aspects of the scourge. It is our hope that you will assist us achieve the objectives of this programme as we all go flat out to raise awareness on the scale of the crisis and to break the conspiracy of silence and stigma surrounding it especially in the rural areas.

Thank you Madam,

Yours Faithfully,



Jonah Kipngeno Rotich,
Chairman ECHEC.

RAISING AWARENESS ON AIDS IN THE RURAL AREAS:

It is a painful reality that we had to cross into the second millenium burdened with the deadly scourge, AIDS. A whole generation of children especially in Africa is now losing its parents to AIDS. The pandemic, an unbearable tragedy and unspeakably cruel, presents us with a situation we can barely comprehend, let alone manage. Moreover, the frantic search for a cure or vaccine still remains elusive, placing the very existence of mankind at a stake. We should therefore not sit back and watch the disease take away breadwinners and leave poor societies even poorer. Hence, unless we do something radical today, we will be unable to do anything tomorrow.

Considering the fact that the rural populace in most African countries form the backbone of the economy, the spread of AIDS in these areas should raise a lot concern. Most of the urban workforce come from the rural areas and thus there is need to educate the rural youth and children on the reality of the disease such that when they complete school and get employed in urban areas, they will be aware of AIDS hence abstain from acts that are known to promote the spread of the disease.

Here in Kenya, most AIDS facilities and resource centres like counselling and information centres as well as Homes that cater for HIV positive and orphaned children, are all located in the urban centres. It seems that we are only targeting the urbanites, the elite and the literate. Should the illiterate rural folk be neglected? Can this marginalisation be justified? It is due to the evident absence of AIDS resource centres and facilities in the rural areas that ECHEC strongly feel that the rural folk have been neglected, marginalised and subsequently denied the right of access to the vital information and education on the scourge. We feel that there should be a non-biased equitable distribution of these facilities so that by all means even the illiterate rural folk, who are still shockingly ignorant of the pandemic and cannot even comprehend and grasp the scale of the crisis, can benefit. The rural folk continue

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to receive and bury their sons and daughters who have succumbed to the disease in urban areas amid a profound conspiracy of silence and stigma, often associating their deaths with witchcraft and other phenomena only known to the traditional medicinemen.

Most families in the rural areas live in abject poverty. This has resulted to a high rate of school drop-outs and subsequent migration to urban areas in search of a means to earn a living. Most girls end up in prostitution, ignorant of AIDS, making them vulnerable to the disease. There is need therefore to educate them beforehand in the rural areas.

It is therefore apparent that much needs to be done as pertains AIDS awareness in the rural areas, bearing in mind the fact that AIDS is rapidly spreading from the urban to the rural areas. As the Chinese adage goes "if you want to help your people for one year, plant rice, if you want to help them for ten years plant trees, but if you want to help for a hundred years, educate them!". We should therefore strive to educate our people on the scale of the crisis in order to break the conspiracy of silence and stigma surrounding it with which the rural folk are still cocooned in.

ECHEC as a community based organisation understands the plight of the rural folk. As pertains AIDS, to them this is an enigma of untold magnitude especially when it comes to caring for their loved ones who have contracted the disease. ECHEC has therefore laid down a strategy to campaign and raise awareness in the rural areas. Due to poor infrastructure and logistics problems in the rural remote areas, we have opted to use expeditions to reach and educate the rural folk on door-to-door basis. Participants shall be drawn from the local communities especially youth groups, schools, colleges and even members of the civil service and teachers. The expedition will traverse the rural terrain educating the people in the language they can understand, in this case their mother tongues. Wherever the groups will camp, there will be educative cinema shows on AIDS and distribution of free condoms. This is appropriate for capacity building.

We also plan to keep the rural youth and children busy by organising a series of cross-country and road-run events. These will keep them pre-occupied since "an idle mind is the devil's workshop". In rural primary and secondary schools, we plan to hold debates with themes on AIDS as well as video shows on the subject.

This is a challenging endeavour considering the fact that ECHEC is still an upcoming CBO operating on meagre resources. With strong forces of hope, faith and determination we shall lay a concrete foundation to counter-attack the global epidemic. As Margaret Mead said "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. In fact it is the only thing that has ever been". We are therefore confident that given the necessary assistance and support we shall achieve the following objectives in a period of three years:

- (i) Through expeditions, cross-country, road-run events and debates, we shall educate the rural folk on AIDS and break the existing conspiracy of silence and stigma.
- (ii) Make the rural folk appreciate the use of condoms for safe sex as some communities detest this practise and is taboo to them.
- (iii) Eradicate cultural practises that enhance the spread of the disease especially circumcision.
- (iv) Educate the rural folk on how to care for HIV positive persons and those with full blown symptoms.
- (V) Provide well eq^uipped AIDS resource centres in the rural areas. For easy access to vital information, ECHEC is therefore appealing for US\$ 600,000 towards this cause. Any suggestions and advise that will contribute to the success of this project shall be appreciated.

Thank you.



The Principal Contact Person is:-
Jonah Kipng'eno Rotich.