

GHESKIO: adapting to challenges in Haiti since the early 1980s



The Haitian Study Group on Kaposi's Sarcoma and Opportunistic Infections (with the French acronym GHESKIO), was founded in 1982 before HIV/AIDS had been formally identified as a disease. It has grown from being a grassroots organisation into a network of clinics and research centres, visited by more than 600 000 patients each year and provides voluntary HIV counselling and testing, HIV treatment, and programmes aimed at tackling other infectious diseases including cholera, tuberculosis, and sexually transmitted infections. It also boasts an education system, with student scholarships and primary education offered. It has long won plaudits for leading the global fight against HIV/AIDS.

Among the consortium of Haitian health professionals that founded GHESKIO was Jean William Pape, who continues to run the organisation while serving as the Howard and Carol Holtzmann Professor of Clinical Medicine, at Weill Cornell Medical College in New York (USA).

In the early 1980s, before the extent and cause of the AIDS crisis was fully understood, 49% of women living with HIV had received a transfusion from a commercial blood bank using paid donors, Pape reported. "We knew that blood products from that commercial bank was contaminated by an infectious agent", he went on to say. In 1986, GHESKIO convinced the health ministry to close the commercial blood bank and to put the Haitian Red Cross in charge of all blood bank operations in the country. "This was the first and most important intervention taken to control HIV/AIDS in Haiti."

"It's not an understatement to say that the pioneering work carried out by GHESKIO in both Haiti and internationally has contributed greatly to the global fight against AIDS", said Yafflo Ouattara, country director for UNAIDS in Haiti, adding that the community-led approach was particularly groundbreaking in the early days of the organisation. "Haiti would be worse without them."

Despite the success boasted by GHESKIO, it has also faced significant challenges. Transgressing cultural barriers proved an early obstacle in tackling HIV in Haiti, with traditional and religious beliefs difficult, alongside widespread stigma, causing people to be recalcitrant. "Early on, people with AIDS were very reluctant to admit how they contracted the disease. Some indicated that someone put a poison in their drinks or food or sent an evil spirit that led them to become sick", Pape said. "As the disease spread widely people realised that it was affecting all persons and as more people became aware of the modes of transmission through information and education, they started using prevention measures including condoms."



GHESKIO

Haiti has a difficult relationship with non-governmental organisations and civil society organisations, of which it once had more than 10 000—an astronomical number given the country's small population of nearly 11 million. Locally, humanitarian aid organisations are often viewed as a parallel state, with foreign workers riding around slums in armoured vehicles. Last year's Oxfam scandal, in which aid workers from the British charity were revealed to have traded sexual favours for aid packages following the devastating 2010 earthquake in Port-au-Prince, did little to lift that perception.

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However, Pape says, that has affected the work of GHESKIO, primarily because it is staffed by Haitians. "Although we work in an area known as 'Kosovo' because of the violence generated by gangs in the slums, GHESKIO was never threatened", Pape explained. "In fact after 36 years not one single GHESKIO employee was ever attacked. We do not have armed security guards on our premises."

Haiti also remains the poorest and most unequal country in the Americas, with infrastructure practically non-existent, another challenge that must be overcome when providing treatment for people living with HIV, who are often the country's most vulnerable. "The unstable sociopolitical environment and the natural disasters affecting the country have been challenging, but they made us more resilient and combative", Pape said, adding that the tumultuous nature of Haiti has caused GHESKIO to become more adaptive. "We have developed contingency plans to deal with all situations."

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