

Harriet Amuron, project coordinator, with a COMUPACT peer educator.

Photo: Caroline Tunyatamba



COMUPACT

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— HARRIET AMURON

In 2004, Harriet Amuron earned a diploma in social work from an institute near Kampala and returned to her hometown of Kumi to look for a job. She found that no salaried position in her field was available. So she volunteered to work for COMUPACT (Community Unity for Participatory Action), a community-based group that opened an office in Kumi the same year that Amuron completed her studies.

Founded in 2002, COMUPACT set out to improve the health and economic life of adolescents in Kamyum village in the Kumi district of eastern Uganda. COMUPACT recruits and trains volunteers to distribute condoms and instructs village youth in poultry keeping.

For two years, COMUPACT’s only office was under a tree. But in 2004, the organization received a grant from AIM that enabled it to rent and equip a red-brick storefront as the Kumi office and expand its HIV/AIDS programs.

Amuron, who is 23 years old, became one of COMUPACT’s three project coordinators. As a project coordinator, she has recruited peer educators, taught them about HIV/AIDS, and instructed them in leadership, communication skills, and basic counseling methods. COMUPACT has trained 46 youths as peer educators. The peer educators, in turn, have organized HIV/AIDS informational activities for more than 600 youths.

COMUPACT shifted its focus last year to concentrate on mobilizing people to be tested for HIV. Amuron worked on the publicity campaign, employing methods such as radio broadcasts and megaphone appeals. The effort enlisted 1,340 people for voluntary counseling and testing at seven villages in Kumi district.

One task was briefing peer counselors on what to say to people who were deciding whether to be tested. “If you are positive, you can take care not to spread it. If you’re negative, you’ll learn how to stay that way,”



Photo: Joe Rosenbloom

Harriet Amuron, left, meets with COMUPACT volunteers who conduct community outreach for HIV testing.

Amuron says, reciting one HIV-test message that she summarized for peer educators.

Mobilized by COMUPACT, villagers' turned out for the test in such numbers that they sometimes exceeded the capacity of lab technicians and counselors to handle the demand. In the village of Kanyum, for example, testing that coincided with a market day on a Wednesday in October drew more than a hundred people. Some had to be turned away.

As a follow-up to its HIV-test mobilization, COMUPACT has organized post-test clubs. The clubs bring youths together to discuss HIV/AIDS and ways to avoid it. Their leaders serve as advocates for abstinence or safe-sex practices and role models in their communities, notes Amuron. "People that we've trained set a good example," she says. "The youths in our project area are behaving more sensibly. We're doing something good."

AIM'S ROLE	Provided funding, technical assistance, and capacity building
TOTAL GRANT	Ush 43,217,350
CONTRACT PERIOD	November 2004 to October 2005
ACTIVITIES SUPPORTED BY AIM	Adolescent-friendly services Behavior change communication Sensitization for PMTCT and VCT services

The opportunity to work as a project coordinator for COMUPACT has been a breakthrough for Amuron personally as well. She explains: "When I came from school, I had to translate that theory into practice. Now I have the life skills. I can communicate without any problem." ■