

NTUDINET

Peace Kaconco, coordinator of the Ntungamo District Network of People Living with HIV/AIDS, or NTUDINET, which has been strengthened through AIM support.

Photos: Joe Rosenbloom



Right: Peace Kaconco at the NTUDINET office, which serves over 1,790 people living with HIV and AIDS.

“We are well organized... We have our structure in place.”

— PEACE KANCONCO

When Peace Kaconco talks about HIV/AIDS and the social stigma attached to the disease, she speaks from personal experience. When Kaconco had the HIV test six years ago and the results were positive, she defied a code of silence that prevailed in her community at the time. She acknowledged openly that she had HIV. Many people reacted by denouncing her, she recalls, her voice quavering even now: “They said, ‘You still have a husband. Why are you saying you are [HIV] positive? Why are you telling us that? You are sinners.’”

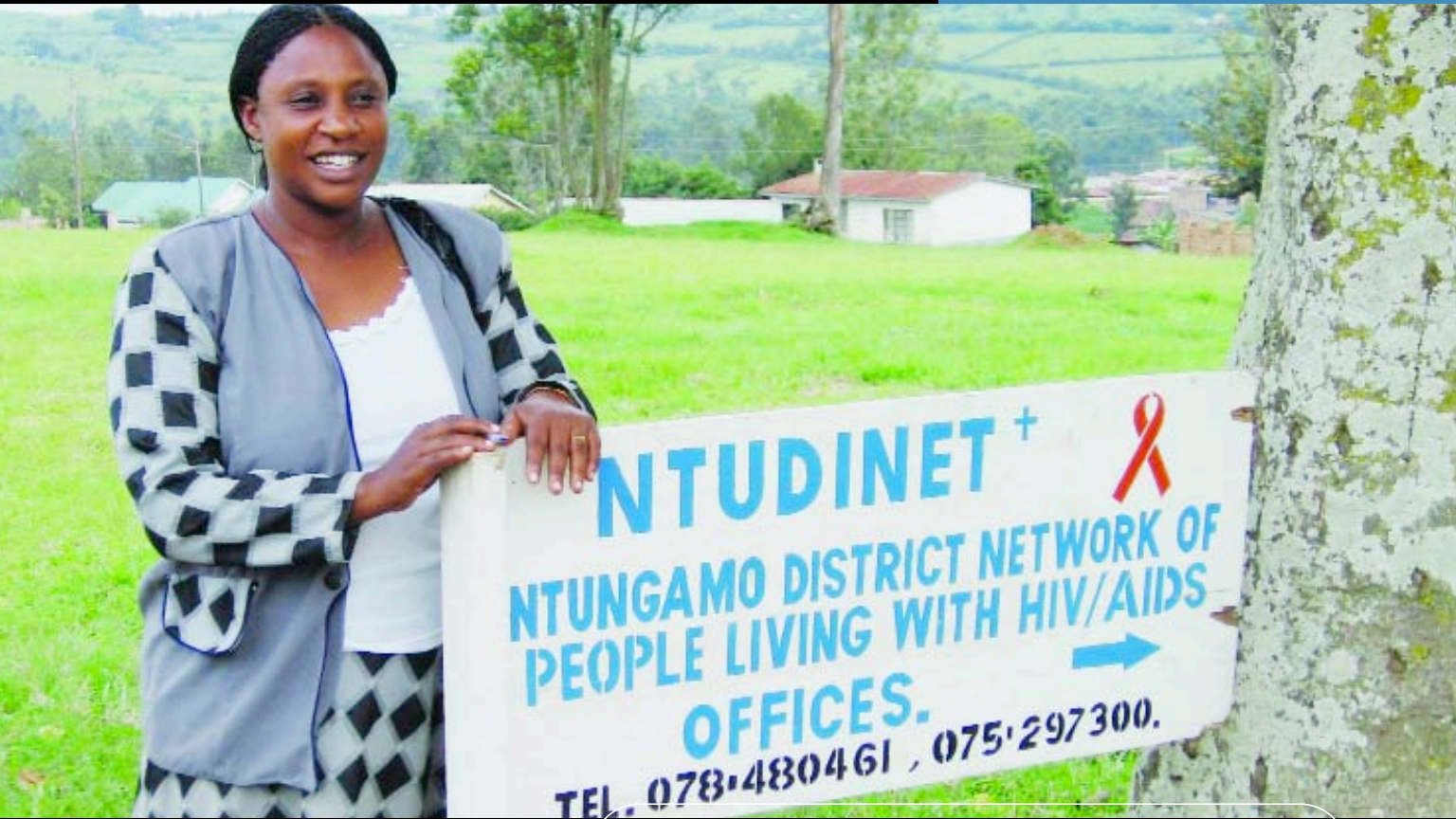
Despite the hostility—or because of it—Kaconco resolved to speak out and fight against the stigma by encouraging others living with HIV to support one another. She became an early organizer of a fledgling HIV/AIDS self-help group in the Ntungamo district.

HIV/AIDS, meanwhile, was battering Kaconco’s family. A brother, a sister, and two sisters-in-law died from AIDS; her husband and two other brothers tested positive for the virus. Her husband, Joshua, who was working as a lay reader for the Church of Uganda, lost his job. The couple’s finances, strained by the costs of paying for prescription drugs and educating their five children, have been a constant worry.

To organize people living with HIV/AIDS into a self-help group, Kaconco sought AIM’s assistance for the network. One of AIM’s priorities has been promoting such efforts by Kaconco and like-minded activists, at the district and sub-district levels. Kaconco became the coordinator of the AIM-supported district-wide group, the Ntungamo District Network of People Living with HIV/AIDS, or NTUDINET.

Kaconco is 40 years old. An animated woman, she was the firstborn of her father’s nine children, which inspired him to name her Peace. She explains: “My father was praying that the firstborn would be a girl. It was so, and he said, ‘Peace be with you.’”

When Kaconco discovered that she had HIV, the stunning realization produced a “vision,” as she puts it. Kaconco started mobilizing other people who were in the same circumstances. AIM supported her with guidance on how to write a grant proposal, introductions to district officials, training in organizational methods, and equipment for the NTUDINET office.



Within Ntungamo district—a banana-growing and cattle-raising area of rolling, green hills in southwestern Uganda—Kaconco’s group has built a network of 1,793 people living with HIV/AIDS. Under the group’s organizational umbrella, post-test clubs have sprung up in all 15 sub-districts of Ntungamo. Total membership exceeds 600. As a member of the Ntungamo District HIV/AIDS Committee, Kaconco has a voice in the district’s policy and planning to fight the epidemic.

AIM-backed groups like NTUDINET have emerged to organize networks in 15 Ugandan districts, registering 60,000 people. The groups work to eliminate the stigma against people living with HIV/AIDS and provide their members with psychological counseling and material goods ranging from mosquito nets to goats.

AIM'S ROLE	Supported Ntungamo Network Forum for PHAs Provided funding, technical assistance, and capacity building
TOTAL GRANT	Ush 9,773,400
CONTRACT PERIOD	May 2005 and December 2005
ACTIVITIES	Home-based care
SUPPORTED BY AIM	PHA support

Along with similar groups, NTUDINET relays information to people living with HIV/AIDS. At its executive-committee meetings in late 2005, for example, NTUDINET funneled pamphlets about Septrin prophylaxis, a drug therapy against opportunistic infections, to its volunteers, who distributed them to sub-district health centers. “We are well organized,” Kaconco says proudly of her district-wide network. “We have our structure in place.” ■