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Cissy Kinaawa Ayebi (right), UN Volunteer HIV and AIDS trainer/counsellor, during a counselling session with the Head of Office of UNAMID's West Sector during an HIV awareness campaign. (UNV, 2015)

## Changing misconceptions about HIV

**Darfur, Sudan:** In 2009, I joined UNAMID as a volunteer HIV and AIDS trainer/counsellor, after having served as a VSO volunteer HIV and AIDS advisor in Cambodia, and as an HIV and AIDS counsellor with TASO in my own country of Uganda. I am passionate about volunteering, having started work as a volunteer in Uganda, and born in a family of volunteers - my father and mother were community volunteers helping those in need.

Arriving in Darfur fresh from Cambodia, I met a vibrant and energetic team of HIV and AIDS volunteers. We all teamed up and worked happily at a challenging time since the HIV unit was one of the last to get established within the African Union-United Nations Hybrid Operation in Darfur (UNAMID).

In a very short time, the team was dispersed: each of us was allocated to a sector where we

were to become team leaders. As the team leader for Darfur's West Sector, my main task involved raising HIV and AIDS awareness among mission personnel, conducting HIV and AIDS training, setting up a Voluntary Confidential Counselling and Testing Centre, as well as carrying out counselling for both civilian and uniformed mission personnel. Externally, I worked with the Sudanese National AIDS Programme and with local communities, including prisons, to raise awareness about HIV/AIDS.

It was challenging talking about HIV and AIDS in El Geinena, where misperceptions about HIV/AIDS are widespread. In the communities people have many misconceptions about HIV, and some people even believe that peacekeepers were responsible for bringing HIV to Darfur. One morning I went to the ablution to refill condoms, only to find defamatory messages against the HIV unit. Local cleaners didn't want to clean our office for fear that they would contract HIV.

In view of this, I decided that I should focus on educating cleaners and other mission personnel about HIV. I also approached the Head of the Office for his support. I talked to him about HIV, about the advantages of knowing one's status, and about the devastating effects of the disease. He agreed to support by leading a campaign about HIV in the Sector.

We conducted a successful campaign, with most section heads as well as many of the staff coming for HIV testing. This was a major breakthrough in my work, and one of the most exciting times in my life since, as a volunteer with specific technical skills and a passion for my work, I managed to change the mission personnel's perception of HIV.

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 **Arab States**

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