

Health officials say while progress has been made, HIV/Aids remains a significant public health concern in the sub-region, particularly among youth, women and urban populations.

BY BILL OKETCH

**L**ango Sub-region is facing an HIV/Aids crisis, according to data from the Uganda Aids Commission (UAC).

According to the 2025 Education, Sustainability and Uganda's Progress against HIV Report released on December 22, five people get infected per hour and 711 people are infected weekly in Uganda.

The situation in Lango Sub-region is dire, with Lira City having the highest HIV prevalence at nine percent, followed by Kole, Kwania, Apac, and Lira districts at six percent.

In Oyam, Alebtong, Amolatar, and Dokolo districts, the HIV prevalence stands at five percent, and in Otuke, it is at four percent.

A total of 96,200 people are living with HIV in the nine districts and one city which make up Lango Sub-region. Of these, 16,300 HIV clients are from Lira and in Oyam, 15,700 people are living with HIV, the report says.

In 2024, there were 2,090 new infections in the sub-region, with 350 new infections among those aged 15 years and above from Lira City alone.

Mr Tom Etii, the director of partnership at UAC, said the country recorded 37,000 new infections and 20,000 Aids-related deaths in 2024.

"HIV is one of the most expensive sicknesses to treat. It costs the government Shs700,000 per year to keep a person living with HIV on treatment. We have 1.5 million people living with HIV in Uganda," Mr Etii said during a meeting organised by Lango Cultural Institution in partnership with the UAC in Lira City last Friday.

The meeting brought together officials from UAC, Lira District and Lira City health departments, cultural leaders, women and youth representatives, and other key stakeholders. It was aimed at strengthening collaboration between cultural leadership and national HIV/Aids response structures in Lango Sub-region.

Poverty, multiple sexual partners, transactional sex, low condom use, men's reluctance to test, stigma and discrimination, early initiation into sex,

# HIV still huge burden as Lango ushers in New Year



Lira District Health Officer Dr Patrick Buchan Ocen (left) provides updates on HIV situation in Lango Sub-region during the meeting in Lira City last Friday. PHOTO/BILL OKETCH

widow inheritance, poor parenting, gender-based violence, and the culture of silence around sexual matters are some of the underscoring challenges in the fight against the pandemic.

Other key drivers include the role of social media and Western "modernisation", alcoholism and substance abuse, poor retention in care, risky sexual behaviours, peer influence, and lack of adherence to treatment.

Ms Christine Anono, the secretary for Agong Foundation, also Lira District Community Development Officer, said only 33 out of 112 school girls from Lango aged between 14 and 16 who attended their recent boot camp were still virgin. One girl was found to be living with HIV.

Dr Patrick Buchan Ocen, the Lira District Health Officer (DHO), noted that although Lango continues to face challenges in the fight against HIV/Aids, the sub-region was leading in retention in care in the whole country at 90 percent.

Unfortunately, in the neighbouring Acholi Sub-region, retention in care was very low, at 58 percent.

"Why should we get concerned? There is a cross-border movement. They [people from Acholi] are very close to us.

## KEY OUTCOMES

Not all is lost. The Friday's meeting resolved to, among others, strengthen collaboration between Lango Cultural Institution and the UAC in HIV/Aids prevention, advocacy and community mobilisation. It was also agreed that HIV/Aids awareness and prevention messaging be integrated into cultural platforms, including clan meetings, women and youth forums and major cultural events.

Dr Willy Okullo, the prime minis-

ter of Lango Cultural Institution, said the meeting also resolved to promote culturally-appropriate approaches to address stigma, misinformation and risky behaviours. "We agreed to develop a framework for sustained partnership, including steps toward a memorandum of understanding and a joint action plan," he said, adding: "We also agreed to support capacity building for cultural leaders to enhance accurate information dissemination and community engagement."

They will put us at risk again and actually increase the rate of transmission among us. So we should be concerned about them," Dr Ocen said.

He added: "That means we should also impress upon them to take this initiative and increase the rate of retention in care for people living with HIV."

Dr Ocen further said the target is to ensure the viral load of 95 percent of HIV clients enrolled on medication is undetectable so that the risk of transmission is lowered further. Unfortu-

nately, among adolescents in the Lango Sub-region, viral load suppression is very poor.

He said this category of HIV clients is poorly retained in care and even for those retained in care, the majority are not taking their medication as recommended.

"So, at the time when it is at its peak, it is highly possible that transmission to another partner may take place," he said.

In the whole country, Lango is ranked

Number-Nine in terms of viral load suppression. The area's viral load suppression stands at 95 percent.

However, participants said tackling HIV/Aids head-on requires, among others, increased awareness and testing, improved access to treatment and medication, targeted interventions for high-risk groups, and community engagement and support.

The Lira DHO said HIV is highest among adolescents.

"Those adolescents are the ones forming the largest number of the population. And they are involved in high-risk sexual behaviours," he said.

"I think we should pay keen attention to them because tomorrow, we are going to exit but they should be able to replace us, and they should be able to do so when they are healthy and active."

Dr Ocen said Lira City leads in terms of HIV distribution among adolescents within Lango Sub-region.

"Much as we are seeing the overall prevalence of HIV among city residents at nine percent, adolescents form the highest proportion of that percentage," he said.

Mr Hillary Okello, the Lira City HIV coordinator, highlighted that stigma and discrimination against people living with HIV/Aids still remains an issue in the national response, negatively impacting HIV testing, treatment and adherence to treatment.

"Stigma and discrimination results in refusal to go for HIV testing, living in denial after an HIV positive test result, and non-adherence to treatment," he said.

"High risk groups mix with the general population and this has an effect on HIV transmission. For instance, 12.3 percent of commercial sex workers reported to be in stable relationships but they serve an average of five clients a day. This is a serious issue in Lira City," Mr Okello added.

Mr Bosco Ogwang Edola, the minister of finance, planning and revenue at Lango Cultural Institution, attributed the challenges in the fight against HIV/Aids to weak laws on substance abuse, high level of alcoholism among young people and widow inheritance.

UAC emphasised the critical role of cultural institutions in shaping values, influencing behaviour and reducing stigma, saying these are key pillars in the fight against HIV/Aids.