Regional Capacity-Building Workshop in Africa

GCTA in collaboration with the Stop TB Partnership and Afro Global Alliance, conducted a Regional Capacity-Building Workshop for TB champions in Accra, Ghana on 7-9 July, 2017. The workshop was tailor-made for those from the Anglophone and Lusophone Africa who have had TB or have been directly affected by the disease and showed a keen interest in building their capacity as effective TB advocates and champions.

Thought-provoking sessions

It was three days filled with powerful stories and buckets of enthusiasm.

The workshop was formally inaugurated by Frank Bonsu, National TB Programme Manager – Ghana, and he highlighted the importance of working together to end TB.

Emmanuel Kwasi Bedzrah, Member of Parliament – Ghana, briefly addressed the group, encouraged participants and said, “engage us as MPs because you are the ones who put us there”. This reaffirmation by a member of parliament was assuring and is considered a milestone in engagement of MPs in TB policy advocacy.

The main facilitators were Blessina Kumar of GCTA, Evaline Kibuchi of Stop TB Kenya and Olive Mumba of Eastern Africa Network of Aids Service Organisation.

Powerful stories

The highlight of the workshop was the session on Story Telling led by Blessina, where the participants were encouraged to tell their TB story. It was a powerful session because many of them never got the chance to tell their story. It was emotional yet there was a strong bond as they identified with each other in the struggle for diagnostics, treatment and fighting stigma.

An advocate from Zimbabwe spoke about how she got TB in prison, and how the food given in prison was not enough and she just couldn’t take her TB medicines. When she revolted, she was made to clean toilets as punishment. The experience was dehumanizing and she wanted to kill herself, but the thought of her 2 children kept her going.

Another advocate from Ghana said that he was kicked out of his house when he started coughing blood. He went to different clinics to try to figure out what was wrong, and it took a long time to diagnose TB. He was planning to kill myself, but it was a kind gesture of a friend – who took him to his house and took care of him — that saved him. He had no money to help him through treatment. On borrowed funds, he would go to the clinic but would not have enough money to come back. It was ultimately the doctor who gave him money. He added he knew nothing of TB before and the world needs to wake up to this killer disease. He ended his story by saying, “It’s not TB that kills you, but the stigma”.

There were also stories of hope. An advocate from Kenya needed 1.2 million shillings to get surgery in India after she was diagnosed with TB of the spine that left her deformed. Her community raised the funds and she got operated. She was happy to reveal that she went for surgery in a wheelchair but came back walking.
A TB advocate from Malawi spoke about the pain of losing his father, mother and younger brother to TB. His mother died just three years ago and was wrongly diagnosed with Malaria. He asked the doctors to test her for TB, and the doctors got angry and ridiculed his suggestion.

Another MDR-TB survivor highlighted the stigma of TB and the pain of losing family because they didn't want to have a 'TB patient' around. After going to 8 different clinics, the survivor recounts how she was finally diagnosed correctly with TB.

Blessina took participants through an informative session on pathways to cure and barriers where participants reflected on their journey from TB symptoms to treatment completion. The participants plan to use this knowledge in spearheading TB activism in their respective regions.

Olive Mumba led the participants through an interesting session about communication and how to tell your story effectively. There were role plays and participants enjoyed and learned through the role plays.

James Malar, STOP-TB Partnership held an informative session for advocates on the UN High Level meeting on TB. There was also an open discussion on what the advocates thought the priorities should be for this important meeting.

Dr Suvanand Sahu, Stop TB Partnership spoke about the importance of community engagement and having the global plan for TB translated into action on the ground.

**Formation of a regional network**

The highlight of the event was the decision to form a regional network of people affected by TB. This network covers all the Anglophone countries and looks to taking advocacy for TB to new heights in Africa.