Southern Africa is one of the regions worst affected by HIV/AIDS in the world. Countries in the region each face similar cultural antagonisms between tradition and the behaviour changes needed to prevent HIV transmission. Social and economic factors as well as over-stretched or insufficient infrastructure hinder attempts to control the devastating impact of HIV/AIDS on individuals and society. Throughout southern Africa, HIV/AIDS continues to be highly stigmatised and this is exacerbated by widespread denial. Although awareness is now believed to be high in some areas, most people do not have in-depth knowledge of HIV/AIDS. This in turn fuels misinformation and fear about the pandemic.

Programme planning is therefore influenced by a distinction between ‘awareness’, which may be superficial, and ‘knowledge’, which is more in-depth and so more likely to lead to the behaviour changes required to stop the spread of HIV. It is clear from the experiences gathered thus far in southern Africa that there is a need to develop effective responses to HIV/AIDS which look beyond awareness and which also help to prevent ‘fatigue’ on the issue.

As the pandemic evolves, people are learning about appropriate responses. Good practise is continually being developed and it is therefore vital to share this information so that communities, including people living with HIV/AIDS everywhere, can learn from these experiences. This VSO Experience in Focus publication shares lessons from the early stages of experience of mainstreaming HIV/AIDS as part of VSO’s Regional AIDS Initiative of Southern Africa, known as RAISA.

A common understanding of what mainstreaming HIV/AIDS means is evolving amongst leading practitioners in this field, including UNAIDS, Oxfam and USAID. Mainstreaming describes the overall concept of responding to HIV/AIDS in development sectors where the pandemic may not ordinarily be addressed, for example, teachers tackling prevention issues in classrooms or community extension workers raising awareness of good nutrition for people living with HIV as part of a rural livelihoods programme. Integration describes the concrete activities within individual projects which tackle HIV/AIDS.

This publication contributes to the evolving pool of knowledge by presenting case studies from a major piece of research that involved interviewing more than 100 people. (See Methodology, page 64). The case studies describe the activities and outcomes of community- or provincial-level HIV/AIDS activities supported by VSO-RAISA. The lessons and recommendations will be of interest to practitioners in this field in southern Africa as well as worldwide.

The findings reinforce the importance of using basic developmental methodologies, in particular participatory approaches, to integrate HIV/AIDS. The case studies clearly show that a participatory, facilitative approach increases sustainability and impact.

**Lessons from VSO’s early experience of mainstreaming HIV/AIDS are:**

1. Appropriate HIV/AIDS responses can be integrated into a variety of sectors using basic developmental approaches.
2. Integrated HIV/AIDS responses should plan beyond the goal of increasing awareness to more practical, people- or community-centred solutions.
3. No HIV/AIDS integration efforts are too small or informal to document and share. A broad range of personal perspectives can highlight valuable lessons and can motivate others.
4. Training and support for facilitators (whether VSO volunteers or not) in practical development methodologies are critical components in a mainstreaming programme. Training motivates and empowers individuals to personalise information about HIV/AIDS and therefore to become a catalyst in integrating HIV/AIDS into their workplace or community.