Trade unions have always tackled major social issues, such as HIV/AIDS. Today, with an estimated 26 million workers in their productive primes living with HIV/AIDS, trade unions are responding to the epidemic by mobilizing their extensive networks and contacts; negotiating and implementing workplace HIV/AIDS agreements/policies; and building on their influence in the community and with the government. Trade unions are also extending their responsibilities to include the following elements.

**Protecting the rights and dignity of people living with HIV/AIDS**

Protecting workers’ rights is an essential component of workplace policies and agreements on HIV/AIDS: it combats the fear and denial surrounding the epidemic and promotes effective HIV-prevention programmes. The Zambia Congress of Trade Unions, for instance, implemented a ‘Crusade against HIV/AIDS’. Launched by former President Kenneth Kaunda, the programme trained four AIDS coordinators at its head office and one in each affiliated union. These coordinators, in turn, trained more than 120 shop stewards. Publicity materials such as posters, brochures and stickers, as well as guidelines for negotiating a HIV/AIDS collective agreement, support their work.

Traditionally, trade unions and labour organizations have:
- organized workers and represented their interests, protected their rights and combated discrimination;
- ensured safe and healthy working conditions;
- promoted access for all workers to a fair income, social insurance and basic health care; and
- participated in social dialogue on national issues affecting employment, the labour market and human resources.

The epidemic threatens the progress of trade unions in all these areas. But, as is the case for people living with HIV/AIDS, workers and their organizations are among the best to provide an effective response.

**HIV/AIDS prevention**

Trade unions can use their experience in education to train workplace representatives as peer educators, as well as to instruct workers on HIV/AIDS issues, including how to assess the risks of their own behaviour and negotiate safer sex. Moreover, unions can make sure that occupational health and safety measures are met—by, for example, ensuring the availability of basic protective equipment. They can also help identify vulnerable groups (such as young and migrant workers) and support efforts that are targeted towards their needs.

**Know your status!**

People who know their HIV status can take appropriate action to protect themselves and others. In Rwanda, a union workshop for scooter taxi-drivers ended with more than 90% of the participants getting HIV tests, and sharing the results. The union then set up a fund for the HIV-infected workers.

**Care and support**

Care and support workplace programmes for HIV/AIDS include: protecting workers from stigma and discrimination; ensuring access to medical benefits and social security; providing community services information, especially when counselling or medical treatment is not available in the workplace; encouraging voluntary counselling and testing; supporting self-help groups; providing treatment for opportunistic infections (especially tuberculosis) and antiretroviral therapy, where possible; and adapting jobs so that people living with HIV/AIDS can work for as long as possible.
The Southern African Clothing and Textile Workers Union (SACTWU) adopted a HIV/AIDS policy and action programme that commits the union to a time-bound workplan, which includes: HIV/AIDS training and awareness-raising; voluntary counselling and testing for workers and their families; affordable and accessible treatment; home-based care; campaigning; and the formation of community partnerships. Other unions have joined forces to support the South African Government’s Nevirapine programme—the drug that prevents mother-to-child transmission of HIV during childbirth and breastfeeding.

Managing the impact of HIV/AIDS

Knowledge is needed to effectively manage and mitigate the epidemic’s personal, social and economic consequences, including the impact on human resources. A number of global union federations, for example, conducted surveys among their members to find out the effect of HIV/AIDS on their work and union activity, and what actions they were taking in response. Many unions now say that all activities should include a HIV/AIDS component, and that the members’ capacities to negotiate HIV/AIDS workplace agreements should be strengthened. Trade unions can also support national efforts to analyse and monitor the epidemic, as well as the effectiveness of responses.

Advocacy and partnerships

Advocacy is needed to: persuade governments that national AIDS policies must be multisectoral and include the world of work; convince employers of the urgent need to implement workplace programmes; and support campaigns that focus on drug availability and strengthening the health system. Unions also have extensive communications networks that can be used for the dissemination of HIV/AIDS messages, including websites, newsletters, notice boards and media contacts. They are also increasingly represented on national AIDS councils or committees, as are employers’ organizations, and should be recognized as key civil society partners.

Policy development

In 2000, the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions’ African Regional Organisation issued the Gaborone Trade Union Declaration and Framework of Action on HIV/AIDS. With the support of the Norwegian trade union centre, a project was then implemented to train shop stewards, execute workplace prevention and care programmes, and publish a training manual.

The International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) encourages its national union centres and the global union federations to develop policies for their own organizations, as well as workplace policies or clauses in collective agreements. Programmes to implement these policies should include: training components for the relevant workplace actors, and structures for monitoring the epidemic’s impact and the effectiveness of the response. The International Confederation of Free Trade Unions is also currently implementing a global mapping exercise to establish an inventory of its affiliates’ actions, with a view to providing guidelines for effective policies, and a programme to mobilize the organizations’ regional structures and national membership.