

A Five-Star Service

Mozambique's luxury Polana Hotel initiates an HIV/AIDS prevention program for its employees

Mozambique's Polana Hotel, built in 1922, has long been regarded as one of the capital's historical and cultural icons. Having stayed operational throughout Mozambique's War for Independence and Civil War, this Grande Dame is more than just a pretty face. Today, the Polana honors its proud history by assuming a leadership role in Mozambique's most critical battle yet: that against HIV/AIDS.

In 2005, the Polana Hotel joined forces with more than 22 other leading businesses to found ECoSIDA (Businesses Against AIDS), an association dedicated to the creation of workplace-based initiatives to address Mozambique's HIV/AIDS epidemic. At 11.5%, Mozambique's HIV prevalence rate is one of the highest in the world. Not only has the epidemic devastated



Hotel Polana's Human Resource Manager, Ana Paula Massuco, discusses the importance of the ECoSIDA project.

individuals, families and communities, it has negatively impacted the productivity and profits of Mozambican businesses. Thus, responding to Mozambique's HIV/AIDS epidemic isn't just the *right* thing for businesses to do, it's the *smart* thing.

"The increased absenteeism from illness and death of workers endangered the productivity of their firms," ECoSIDA's Policy and Programs Officer, Balbina Santos relates, "These companies understood that it was urgent to act." Adds ECoSIDA Executive Director Cornélio Balane, "Adults spend most of their lives at work. So, if you can provide them with a healthier work environment, you can provide them with a healthier life."

Feeling the effects of HIV and AIDS on its business and employees, the Polana Hotel created a partnership with ECoSIDA's Healthy Workers Project. Supported by PEPFAR through USAID, the Project seeks to promote positive behavior change for HIV prevention, and create a work environment free of stigma and discrimination against people living with HIV/AIDS. To that end, Polana management created time during the workday for all interested employees to participate in HIV prevention discussion sessions conducted by trained facilitators from ECoSIDA's Healthy Workers Project. The 1-hour sessions, which are conducted in cycles of six sessions, cover numerous relevant topics, including prevention of HIV and sexually transmitted infections, prevention of mother-to-child transmission, testing and counseling for HIV, and the benefits of anti-retroviral treatment. Between May and September of 2013, a total of 269 Polana employees have participated in the sessions, and 235 Polana employees have received on-site HIV testing and counseling.

Polana Human Resources Manager Ana Paula Massuco, who monitors the sessions closely, sees the impact on her staff and her own work as a manager. Ms. Massuco has observed improved interest and engagement among staff participants with each session. Furthermore, Ms. Massuco notes changes in her own perception that are critical for creating a positive environment for her employees. “I have come to see HIV as a chronic illness, like diabetes or hypertension,” she says.

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Ms. Muchambo.

Employee participants also report positive behavior change as a result of session participation. Bartender Judith António Muchambo remembers, “At the first session, it was as if the ECoSIDA facilitator was talking directly to me.” The session, which included discussion about the importance of condom use, resonated personally with Ms. Muchambo, who is widowed and sexually active. “To be perfectly honest, I had never used a condom. But, through the session talk, I began to understand that this is a serious issue. Without a condom, I was in danger. So I started using condoms.” At a subsequent session, Ms. Muchambo came to understand that her brother’s recent death was from AIDS. Recognizing that she might have been able to save her brother’s life had she better understood his illness, Ms. Muchambo is determined to help his widow. “I am doing everything I can to convince her to get tested,” Ms. Muchambo reports.

ECoSIDA is one of 37 Mozambican civil society organizations that have received grants through the Capable Partners Program (CAP), implemented by FHI 360, in Mozambique. Supported by the U.S. President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) through USAID, CAP provides leading civil society organizations with grants and intensive technical assistance in organizational development, program implementation and financial management. Through this support, CAP helps Mozambican civil society organizations expand their critical role in Mozambique’s HIV/AIDS response.