Large numbers of men, some with their families, come to Port Moresby in search of employment and an urban lifestyle. They arrive in the country’s capital with high hopes but jobs are scarce. Many who seek work do not find it.

With no money to return to their villages these young men gravitate towards one of the several settlements (squatter camps) dotted around Port Moresby. The Six Mile Settlement is but one example.

With little infrastructure, sanitation is of a very basic standard. The children who live in the camp have limited access to education. In Papua New Guinea, the state-run education system is not affordable for all.

As in other camps, residents build makeshift shelters, find what work they can, and live a hand to mouth existence. With little money coming into the camp a cycle of poverty forms from which few escape.

Yet, at Six Mile, there is a degree of social order and civil administration. With residents from most of Papua New Guinea’s provinces represented at Six Mile, conflict between different ethnic clan groups has been a problem.

Since the formation of a community group – the Saraga Peace and Good Order Committee – with sub-committees on youth, women and justice – trouble in the camp has dropped significantly. Settlement leaders come together and work out rules to enable the large disparate group to live together. The evidence indicates that the system is working.

**THE SHADOW OF HIV/AIDS**

With so many people living in poor circumstances the potential for HIV/AIDS spreading at Six Mile is very high. It’s something settlement leaders have realised and are determined to avoid.

Gilman Ivana, a settlement resident, who works with Anglicare’s STOPAIDS – an organisation funded by the Australian Government through AusAID – has arranged for awareness training to be conducted on a regular basis. As he explains, ‘AIDS is a disease that can affect anyone. AIDS sufferers are just like you and me and we need to educate people about the disease and how it is transmitted.’

STOPAIDS runs reproductive health and condom awareness training sessions for settlement leaders from 18,000 of the most disadvantaged people in Papua New Guinea.
residents. It also arranges for HIV/AIDS counselling and testing for those who believe they may have been exposed to the disease through their infected partners (many of whom have since died).

In addition, STOPAIDS runs a ‘positive living’ circle for people living with HIV. This provides moral and spiritual care for victims and gives them confidence. Several members of the support network have volunteered to give talks to communities, such as the Six Mile Settlement (see Living with HIV). They talk about how HIV/AIDS has affected their lives and how important it is to face up to the disease. These talks also help to de-stigmatise the disease and reduce the fear many people have about coming into contact with people living with HIV/AIDS.

With a high infection rate in Papua New Guinea, HIV/AIDS clearly has the potential to destroy vulnerable populations, such as those in the settlements around Port Moresby. With the assistance of the Australian Government and a band of dedicated workers in Papua New Guinea, as well as settlement residents themselves, that scenario is less likely. LM

**LIVING WITH HIV**

Margaret Marabe lost her husband to HIV/AIDS so when she fell ill she knew she had also contracted the virus.

At 29 years of age, Margaret Marabe fell on hard times. Her family and friends rejected her for fear of infection. At this most difficult point in her life Mrs Marabe found an inner strength that made her want to renew her ties with her church and start to look to the future. Mrs Marabe says the turning point was meeting a volunteer from Anglicare’s STOPAIDS.

The ‘people living with HIV’ support network welcomed her warmly and, with encouragement from STOPAIDS, she learnt how to take one day at a time and how to live ‘hopefully’ with HIV.

These days Margaret Marabe gives speeches to women who could find themselves in a similar position. Women whose husbands may contract HIV/AIDS through unprotected sex with other partners. She tells her story to encourage women to take responsibility for their health and to insist that their partners use condoms.

Mrs Marabe’s HIV-positive status motivates her to work hard every day to battle discrimination. Many people still believe that they can contract HIV/AIDS merely by touching an infected person. Her efforts are helping to de-stigmatise HIV/AIDS and reduce widespread fear and ignorance of the disease.

**USING THE LAW AGAINST HIV/AIDS**

With assistance from Australia, the Government of Papua New Guinea has enacted landmark legislation that offers protection from ‘discrimination, stigma and promises access to means of protection.’

The country’s Minister for Health, Melchior Pep, is working with AusAID advisers to build the necessary regulatory frameworks to enforce the legislation. He is strongly promoting the new laws and is working hard to stop the spread of HIV/AIDS. ‘If many of our younger generation are infected now and many are at risk of contracting HIV/AIDS, Papua New Guinea will lose many of its talented and able people in the next 10 to 15 years. I want to sincerely thank the people and the Government of Australia for the assistance. Together we can make a difference in containing, and preventing further, the spread of HIV/AIDS.’

**NATIONAL AIDS COUNCIL**

Approximately one quarter of Australia’s international HIV/AIDS assistance is in Papua New Guinea.

Projects under the auspices of the National AIDS Council work across all sectors of government, and with all levels of the community. These include churches, youth groups and non-government organisations.

The National HIV/AIDS Support Project underpins the work of the Government of Papua New Guinea in its aim to reduce the impact of HIV/AIDS across the country. It focuses on:

» raising awareness through education and information to promote behaviour change
» improving counselling and community care and support
» monitoring the spread of HIV/AIDS
» improving clinical services and medical care
» providing policy advice.

The Australian Government is providing $60 million over five years to support these activities.
There are no technically-advanced facilities for people living with HIV/AIDS in Papua New Guinea. Patients coming to the end of their lives are admitted to the country’s state-run hospitals, and are sometimes placed in the infectious diseases wards, along with tuberculosis sufferers. For people with depleted immune systems, this action only exacerbates their condition.

As part of Australia’s aid commitment to Papua New Guinea, the Australian Government has donated $250,000 for the construction of a drop-in centre for HIV-positive people. The centre, which will be managed by the non-government organisation Anglicare, will provide counselling and support. It will also run awareness-training workshops and distribute information and condoms.

At the dedication ceremony, former Prime Minister, Sir Mekere Morauta, said, ‘AIDS threatens the future of this great country. If we do not do something serious to stop the spread of this disease, Papua New Guinea faces a future without its children. Today’s ceremony marks the beginning of a big step in the right direction. We must work hard to ensure we continue in this direction to stop the spread of AIDS.’

Anglicare hopes that the financial contribution from the Australian Government will enable the centre’s main building to be completed by early 2004.

For more information contact acpngpom@global.net.pg

The drop-in centre for HIV-positive people will provide support for many families. Photo: Lorrie Graham

How do you teach people about a subject that’s not spoken about in the home, that can’t be delivered in writing due to high illiteracy rates, and that elicits fear at every mention? Put it in a play and ham it up! That’s what the volunteer theatre group Nubanub decided to do when the National AIDS Council’s Madang Provincial AIDS Committee set them the task.

The volunteer theatre group travels around Madang Province putting on plays at the local markets and other community meeting places. Crowds gather three or four deep around the fenced-off grassy ‘stage’ for the free entertainment. And entertaining it is. A well-known local actor takes on the persona of ‘AIDS’ who tries to entice young people into sexual relations and then dooms them to a life of illness.

The play, delivered with humour and wit, enthrals the audience for the full 45-minutes. By the end of the play everyone has been thoroughly entertained but also, more importantly, everyone has learnt some vital lessons. For example, the audience is left in no doubt as to the possible consequences of unprotected sex. Free condoms reinforce this message and by distributing them so openly and casually, resistance to using condoms is eroded – part of the National AIDS Council’s strategy.

The Government of Papua New Guinea is serious about dealing with the spread of HIV/AIDS. The endorsement of condom use in a conservative and religious country clearly shows this. Overwhelming evidence indicates that the main method of HIV infection is through unprotected heterosexual relations.

Traditional performance art in full flight.

Photo: Lorrie Graham

A PLACE FOR CARING

PLAY IT AGAIN FOR HIV/AIDS