

“2010-by-2010”

The

“Women to Vienna”

Twinning Project

for the

18th International AIDS Conference

Evaluation Report

GS:SG

Gemeinnützige Stiftung Sexualität und Gesundheit

Title:
Evaluation Report: 2010-by-2010 – The “Women-to-Vienna” Twinning Project

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Figure 1: Participants of the Twinning Project wearing their pink scarves at a session about the project in the Women's Networking Zone, 18. IAC Vienna 2010

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the following people and organizations, without whom, the Twinning Project could not have taken place.

First and foremost, the Twins, Aygün and Andrea, Irena and Christin, Marina and Alex, Parvina and Silvia, Tamila and Wezi, whose warmth, friendliness, willingness to participate, humour, flexibility, and enthusiasm made the hard work worthwhile.

We are immensely grateful to our donors, Abbott, Boehringer Ingelheim, and Gilead, All Around Women special, the women's section of the German AIDS Society (DAIG); Female Physicians for AIDS "3A", and the Women ARISE coalition, without whose belief in the project, we would not have been able to bring any women to Vienna.

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The purpose of this report is to describe the process of initiating and implementing the Twinning Project and review its outcomes; honour the women who put so much of their personal time, energy and resources into making it happen; express our gratitude towards the donors, allies and other stakeholders who supported it; celebrate the experiences of the women who took part in it; and gain a greater depth of understanding as to the importance of women's networking, both at the individual level and as a tool for positive change.

1. Introduction

Many women living with HIV in Europe face stigma, discrimination, and isolation. Women activists working in the field of HIV often find themselves in a potentially intimidating, low-resourced and under-supported environment, and HIV positive women activists face the additional challenges of balancing these with treatment regimens and health concerns. For openly HIV positive activists, there is often an expectation that they will draw on personal experiences and/or speak 'on behalf of' other women living with HIV, adding a significant element of personal exposure with the accompanying psychological and emotional risks that this entails, and a mantle of responsibility towards others to their work.

Many women living with HIV are further marginalised on the basis of actual or assumed professional or lifestyle choices or circumstances, such as sex work, drug use, migration, or experiences of violence, and these women often face the additional risk of marginalisation within the HIV community as well as within society at large. For all women activists working in the field of HIV, emotional resiliency, stamina and confidence are a professional necessity, but not necessarily a given.

The biennial International AIDS Conference (IAC) is an important fixture in the AIDS activism calendar, being the largest scale event of its kind by far, and thus providing a platform (or rather, hundreds of platforms) for learning, sharing, advocating and lobbying, launching new initiatives and research, raising voices, strengthening old alliances and forming new ones, and networking, networking, networking. But the IAC is not a friendly space. In addition to the challenges associated with activism described above, it is a huge, noisy, crowded, jostling space, often located in an unfamiliar city, conducted in unfamiliar languages, where everyone is rushed off their feet trying to carry out their particular competing agenda. It is a stressful environment.

The choice of Vienna as host city for the XVIII International AIDS Conference in July 2010 was intended to increase the potential for participation of delegates from Eastern Europe and Central Asia and mobilise the community of people living with and affected by HIV and AIDS, as well as scientists and policy makers in this region. Vienna has often acted as a bridge between West and East Europe, and this strategic situating of the International AIDS Conference provided the blueprint of the Twinning Project.

The project was conceptualized in May 2009, when the German network "Women and AIDS" met with representatives of the International Community of Women living with HIV and AIDS (ICW) in Cologne, Germany to prepare for AIDS2010. Harriet Langanke, Director of the Cologne-based Charitable Foundation Sexuality and Health (Gemeinnützige Stiftung Sexualität und Gesundheit: GSSG), which hosted the meeting, conceived the idea of supporting community-based women to be involved in the IAC through 'twinning' women from Germany with women from Eastern Europe and Central Asia.

The project would assist selected women with registration, accommodation, transport and subsistence costs to support their participation at AIDS 2010, with the idea of both supporting women's engagement and sowing the seeds of cross regional networking among women involved in the HIV community. In addition, the 'twinning' system would support the women, for many of whom this would be their first International AIDS Conference, and enhance their conference experience by pairing them and providing them with access to – at the very least – a small group of similarly placed women.

By linking this project to her work with national (e.g. the German Network of Women and AIDS) and supranational networks (e.g. ATHENA Network, the Women's Networking Zone partnership, etc.), Harriet enabled the Twinning Project participants to access and benefit from existing well-established networks of women activists as well as a welcoming space within the conference grounds – the WNZ lounge.

The project brought five pairs of Twins (ten women) to the Vienna Conference. Five of the women came from different cities in Germany, and the other five came from different countries around Eastern Europe and Central Asia: Russia, Ukraine, Lithuania, Tajikistan and Azerbaijan. Each Twin was required to speak at least one official conference language (English or Russian). Sero-status was not a criterion for selection but the women needed to demonstrate that they were part of their home country's HIV community and be prepared to share learning from the conference with their home community on return. Six of the women were in fact living openly with HIV.

The conference for me is one opportunity to see thousands of people living with HIV and to help each other, I am not alone. From within this programme I can make enormous changes within my country. (Tamila)

For this week I felt myself a part of the world – this is really a great sense for me to be part of a great movement where people are not indifferent to the issues going around. I am a part of this world struggling for some thing good and something better. (Aygün)

2. Funding and Support

It is notoriously difficult to find sponsors to support people to attend the International AIDS Conference (IAC) as delegates, despite recognition of and general support for the participation of affected community members at least since 1998, with 'official' community parallel organizing beginning in 2000 at the Durban Conference. Most donors tend to prefer to support activities that have the potential to reach more people, such as outreach and mobilization efforts and on-site activities and platforms catering to larger numbers of people.

Fundraising for the Twinning Project began about a year before the conference in the summer of 2009. About 35 organizations were approached with written fundraising proposals. Despite initial interest and verbal support from donors' organisations, including the German Ministry of Health, the EU, and the International AIDS Society who convene the IAC, neither financial support nor support in kind (such as conference registration fees being waived) was forthcoming, on the basis of the project being a pilot.

Financial support was forthcoming from pharmaceutical companies, Abbott, Boehringer Ingelheim, and Gilead. Additional funding came from All Around Women special, the women's section of the German AIDS Society (DAIG); Female Physicians for AIDS "3A", and the Women ARISE coalition. The Women's Health Center, (FGZ) Munich, gave gifts to be included in welcome bags for the Twins, The ATHENA Network donated one free Conference registration, and an unnamed female supporter donated two free admissions. One of the selected Twins was awarded a scholarship which covered her registration, flight, accommodation and subsistence expenses. The Twins also benefitted from donations in kind made to the Women's Networking Zone (WNZ) by Quietvox who provided technical devices (headsets and microphones) for translation, and some additional funds came from donations for t-shirts at the WNZ. The World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts (WAGGGS) offered further assistance with miscellaneous logistics in Vienna.

3. Methodology / Process

At another meeting in Cologne in February 2010, a committee of six experts² set up criteria for participation and developed a short, easy-to-fill-in and self-explanatory application form. The draft form was pre-tested before dissemination to make sure it met these qualities. Criteria for selection included being part of the local/national HIV-community and being willing and able to share experience after return home; working knowledge of one official conference language (English or Russian); HIV status was not requested and was not a criterion for selection.

The form was then translated into English and Russian. Application forms were distributed to organizations and mailing lists via e-mail through many international networks: Bordernet, AIDS in Europe, ICRSE, ATHENA, EATG and national networks (Aidshilfe-organisations, Netzwerk Frauen und Aids, AAWS, 3A). The application period was five weeks.

² Three internal to GSSG (Ulrike Sonnenberg-Schwan, President of All Around Women Special, the women's section of the German AIDS Society DAIG; Gaby Wirz, Managing Director of the AIDS-Hilfe Baden-Württemberg; Elfriede Steffan from SPI research Institute and Bordernet project) and three external (Andrea von Lieven from IAVI; Sylvia Urban, Board of Deutsche AIDS Hilfe; and Dorle Miesala-Edel, Ukraine expert for the Federal Ministry of Health).

Applications were received by email and telefax. In total 98 applications were received. Most of these came from Eastern European / Central Asian countries. A few applications came from other countries (Portugal, England, the US and from Africa), which were not eligible for participation in the project.

Surprisingly, there were relatively few applications from within Germany. The reasons identified for this were: other obligations (e.g. spend summer holidays with family); language barriers (“my English is not good enough”); and bad experiences from former conferences (“such a circus”).

Forms received in Russian had to be translated before they could be put before the committee for review and selection. Two translators, Irina Avdeeva from Ukraine and Tzvetina Arsova Netzelmann from Berlin, proved exceptionally generous in carrying out the translation of these applications and other project documentation on a voluntary basis.

In late April, the committee chose the participants. The selected women were notified as planned by May 3rd.

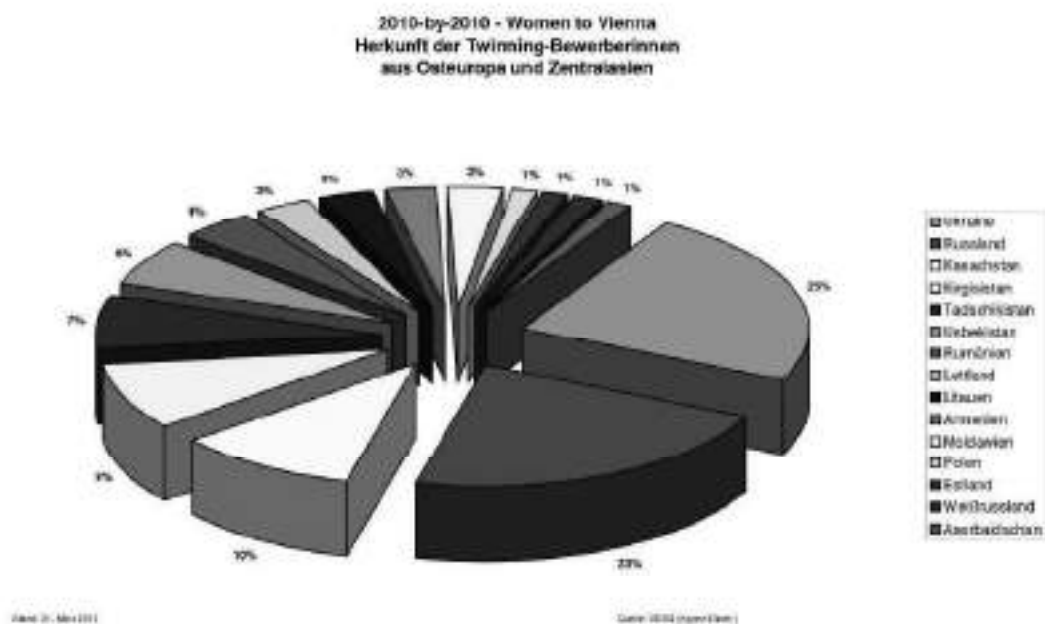


Figure 2 }: applications from Eastern Europe and Central Asian countries

The project had set out to bring 20 women in total to Vienna as 10 Twin pairs.³ By the time of selecting the applicants, funding had only been secured for one or two pairs of women, so it was felt to be too ambitious to go ahead with the original 20. Instead, 10 women were selected, with another 5 on a reserve list.

³ The original name for the project was 2010-to-2010 referencing the idea of 20 women as 10 pairs of ‘Twins’, twinned with the year of the Conference

Two women dropped off (one to lack in communication; one became pregnant and was not allowed to fly anymore). The remaining from the waiting list frequently asked for information; sadly funds were not ultimately sufficient to support their participation.

4. Logistics / Pre-Conference Preparations

The twins were asked to arrange their travel on their own, but most of women from the Eastern Europe / Central Asia needed assistance in applying for a visa. The hotel was identified by Sabine Lex from AIDS-Hilfe Wien: it was to be medium class, in the line of a typical Viennese pension rather than a classic hotel from a big chain. It had to meet standards of being affordable, clean, nice enough to welcome professional women; be close to public transport and not too distant from the Conference Centre. The Haydn Hotel was in a lively, downtown area, with good accessibility to restaurants, etc.

5. Media

Three press releases were made prior to the conference – to announce the project; call for participants, and to launch the funding appeal ‘Adopt a Twin’. Articles were also published in *DHIVA* magazine in issues 45, December 2009; 46, March 2011; and 47, June 2010. These and other on-line resources were (and still are) accessible via the homepage of the GSSG website (www.stiftung-gssg.de). A further press release was made in August 2010 subsequent to the conference, and articles were also prepared for *DHIVA* issue 48, September 2010, and special ‘Vienna’ editions of *AIDS Legal Quarterly (ALQ)* featuring *Mujeres Adelante*, and *Positively UK* magazine to review the Conference during the autumn of 2010.

6. Conference participation

Russia: ‘The main driver of epidemic in our region is drug using. This is like a sentence for people. [There is] lack of access to substitution programmes – they’re forbidden. Rehab is also unavailable ... TB is also a big problem. Some days ago I’ve heard about children infected with TB in Africa, but nobody talks about Russia.’ (Marina)

A Terms of Reference guiding the expectations around participation in the Conference was included in the application form as a declaration of commitment. The only mandatory requirements made of each Twin was to share a room with her twinning partner at the booked hotel, not to choose to go and stay anywhere else; and to take part in the one session about the project in the Women’s Networking Zone. All ten Twins were at the session, and spoke about their home communities and what the conference experience had meant to them, both as individuals and as members of local *and global* communities of women living with and affected by HIV and AIDS.

Despite being under no obligation to do so, the Twins tended to spend most of their time together, either in their twinned pairs, sub-groups, or as a whole group. One of the Twins had a larger number of commitments than any of the others related to her organization, but it was common for the twins to eat together in the evening as well as spending time together during the day.

A welcome pack was left at the hotel for each Twin to find on her arrival. These included bags full of condoms sent by condom companies as contribution in kind – 5 packs of condoms to each twin. There were also gifts – books and leaflets – from the group Positive Frauen at the Munich Women’s Health Centre; materials about GSSG and some small gifts from Cologne, the hometown of GSSG; copies of DHIVA magazine; Lifeboat DVDs; a pink scarf and a welcome note saying ‘with the scarves you can show that you belong to the Twinning Project.’

There was no obligation on the part of the Twins to wear the scarves, but all of them wore them all the time as symbol that they belonged together; ‘not,’ Harriet says, ‘as a uniform – rather, they served as an item of identity.’

Lithuania: ‘There has been a huge growth of HIV in Lithuania; the group with the highest numbers is injecting drug use.’ (Irena)

There were no official ties with the Women’s Networking Zone (WNZ). However, Harriet and two of the Twins were involved

as WNZ Steering committee members; Harriet herself led the Media working group, and another of the Twins was involved in both the Media and the Young Women’s working groups of the WNZ organizing team. Another of the Twins was involved in a session in the WNZ on the opening evening to introduce the German Network of Women and AIDS. As a result the Zone presented itself as a natural base or meeting point, and several of the Twins participated in a number of WNZ sessions, and were enthusiastic participants in the Human Rights March.

Ukraine: ‘Women are most discriminated at workplace and at medical centres. Also women in prison are discriminated because they don’t have access to treatment and testing.’ (Tamila)

Some also met several times at the German booth in the main hall. Harriet did not attempt to create a ‘group dynamic’ among the Twins, nor especially to encourage group activities, but noticed that several activities were undertaken together, such as sight-seeing, breakfast at the hotel, and other appointments to meet each other. This dispelled any fears she had had about the pairs not getting on together, any requests to change rooms, or move to a different hotel.

There was a concern that language barriers could have caused conflict or linguistic groupings, but even this appeared not to happen; there were no conflicts that Harriet became aware of, and this is reflected in the comments made by the Twins in the WNZ session, and the post-conference questionnaires.

A Poster Presentation about the Twinning Project was presented at the Women ARISE booth and at the WNZ during the Twinning Project Session.

Some of the Twins were involved in sessions on the part of their organizations, such as a session in the WNZ on new prevention technologies led by IAVI; another of the twins was involved in a poster presentation in the Global Village that can be accessed through this link: <http://sexworkerurope.org/icrse/index.php/en/campaigns-mainmenu-190/icrse-iac2010/news-aids2010/aids2010-demetra-icrse>

Another important event, which involved some of the Twinning project participants either directly or indirectly, was the launch of the network of women living with HIV in Europe and Central Asia region (WECARe+) in the WNZ on Tuesday 20th July. The network was born out of the same meeting in Cologne, in May 2009, that gave rise to the Twinning Project. Harriet Langanke of GSSG and Twinning Project participant Silvia were instrumental in its inception. 'Silvia said "I want an international network,"' reports Harriet. 'That's exactly what WECARe+ is.' Two of the Twins (Wezi and Andrea) were intrinsically involved in the launch event as the two signatories to the new WECARe+ constitution, formally registered in June 2010.

Since returning to her home country, Tajikistan, another Twinning Project participant, Parvina, has not only become a member but has also become a leading representative of Central Asia with strong support from her boss at the Centre for Mental Health, who has allocated 3 hours a week of Parvina's working time to developing the network in Tajikistan. The Centre for Mental Health is the leading organisation working on HIV in Tajikistan, and Parvina is the only openly positive woman in the organisation.

Tajikistan: 'Migration has an influence for the growing number of HIV infections in Tajikistan. The men see sex workers and try drugs in Russia. They get infected with HIV and at the time of coming back their wives get infected. It's possible to identify HIV positive people either at the time of pregnancy or at the time of children being born ... I was forced to give blood for testing. It was identified that I am HIV positive and all our colleagues knew about my status.' (Parvina)

Translation threatened to pose perhaps the greatest barrier towards meaningful participation for the Twins; the official conference languages were English and Russian – but sessions outside of the plenary sessions were overwhelmingly in English with no translation provided. In a last minute effort Harriet was able to recruit a young Russian and German speaking volunteer from Germany, Alina Harter, who was also knowledgeable on issues relating to HIV. Alina was an indispensable member of the Twinning Project team throughout the conference week, dedicated to assisting the Twins as well as giving additional time to the WNZ.

7. Monitoring and evaluation

A monitoring and evaluation plan for the Twinning project was devised by Harriet Langanke and Luisa Orza, joint coordinator of the WNZ. The plan comprised four elements:

- a pre-conference survey examining hopes/expectations, intentions and fears or concerns around the conference and time in Vienna;
- the Twinning Project session in the WNZ which was designed to reflect on the conference experience of the participants;
- a post-conference questionnaire with questions drawn from common themes in the pre-conference survey; and,
- the development of 2-3 case studies to see whether there had been any longer term follow up from their conference experience

The pre-conference survey was returned by all the project participants. Some of the common themes and issues were extracted as follows:

Hopes/Expectations of AIDS2010
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • East-West partnership / exchange / dialogue • Strengthen women's rights movement / approaches in AIDS response • Develop personal networks and areas for future collaboration
Intentions / plans for during the conference
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gain contacts / make friends • Increased knowledge (esp cross regional / global realities in relation to HIV and living with HIV; specific area – Prevention, ARVs, positive pregnancy) • Act as a conduit between home organisation and IAC – both representing org/network and being able to bring info / skills / methodology home <p>Active involvement in WNZ</p>
Fears or concerns about time in Vienna
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time management – missing sessions / events due to clashes • Feeling overwhelmed, isolated or vulnerable (including due to language issues) <p>Acceptance by Twin/ into Twinning programme</p>

The Twinning Project session was an opportunity to present the project; to share some of the cultural background and diversity of the Twins, in particular looking at issues facing women living with HIV in their countries; and, to reflect on the experience of participating in Vienna 2010 and the Twinning Project.

Each pair of Twins was comprised of one woman from Germany and one from Eastern Europe / Central Europe. The 'Eastern' Twins came from:

- Furthest North: Vilnius in Lithuania,
- Furthest South: Baku in Azerbaijan,
- Furthest East: Dushanbe in Tajikistan,
- Also South: Kiev in Ukraine,
- And also East: Ekaterinburg in Russia.

Azerbaijan: 'I didn't know a lot about internally displaced people. When I asked [Aygün] about IDPs and how they get access to condoms she said they have angels... then I realised she said they have NGOs.' (Andrea)

The elements of cultural exchange, a sense of belonging and of transcending difference, and a strong belief in having formed a lasting bond with the potential for collaboration and networking were three of the areas that came out most strongly in the session, as well as specific details about issues affecting women in relation to HIV in each of the Eastern countries of the region.

'I've met so many people from so many tribes of the world and I've made so many contacts with so many women – my dream is to have a global women's network to make the voices of women strong and loud.' (Silvia)

The post-conference questionnaire was based on the most frequent areas that came up in the pre-conference survey in terms of hopes/expectations, intentions and concerns or fears. The questionnaire covered 9 areas in total; 3 regarding personal outcomes, 3 regarding organisational outcomes; and, 3 regarding network outcomes.⁴ For each question the participants were asked to:

- give a score from 0 – 5 (low scores indicate a lack of satisfactory outcomes in the area, and high scores indicate very satisfactory outcomes in the area)
- write a short narrative giving one or more examples of achievements in the area

Seven out of ten questionnaires were returned.

7.1 Personal Outcomes

- **Support and acceptance from other twins / programme**

Average score: 4.9 (range 4 – 5)

Responses to the questionnaire indicated that all the participants felt overwhelmingly supported and at ease with their twinned pairs, the rest of the participants and the project coordinator and others associated with the project. The pairs spent more or less time with one another depending on how many other conference commitments they had, but invariably spent some time together each day. They reported feeling supported and cared for at personal and professional levels. *'Also she was supporting me in understanding some issues related to HIV that challenged me before'* (Aygün).

The universal sense of involvement and interest of all the project participants in the conference and related issues was an important factor in making the twins feel supported. Language barriers were reported both as a concern prior to the conference, and as a potential and actual barrier to communication, but these were never felt to be insuperable, indeed in some cases, the challenge of overcoming the language barrier was a path to forming strong friendships and bonds. *'Sometimes the language problems hindered us to share information but we could impress our feelings openly and understood each other emotionally'* (Marina).

⁴ We recognise that outcomes identified as 'personal,' 'organizational,' or 'network' level may also operate on other levels as well, and that the impact at any or all of the levels may change over time.

There was a sense of amazement among the responses about the way in which their twinned partners had met their needs in terms of support, friendship, cultural acceptance and reducing linguistic isolation. *'I can truly say that my twin helped me balance my sense of vulnerability that I experienced with much going on during the conference for me. This was completely unexpected'* (Andrea).

- **Participation and involvement**

Average score: 4.4 (range 4 – 5)

The levels and ways in which the Twins participated in the conference varied a lot. One participant had a scholarship to the conference; others would not have been able to attend without support from the Twinning Project. Some had a number of speaking/presenting and other commitments related to their organizations of affiliations, whereas others were involved as listeners, learners, networkers and representatives of their home organizations and countries. *'I was a listener in the conference sessions – [this] provided me with a broad view on the global process: I gained significant knowledge on what extent women are involved in the struggle against HIV and AIDS, how the HIV affected people support each other and actively participate in global policy against violations'* (Aygün).

Most if not all the Twins participated in the Human Rights March as part of the WNZ / Women ARISE contingent, and for some it was the first time to be involved in this sort of activity. *'It was very impressive to feel that I am the part of huge wave of adherents'* (Marina).

All the Twins took part in the WNZ session mentioned above. For some it was an opportunity to present their organization at an international level for the first time. For others it was an opportunity to reflect on the conference and experience of the Twinning Project, and open it up to a wider audience. *'I can say that this session was so affirming that we had succeeded in opening the gate to the East!'* (Andrea).

- **Time management – getting the most out of the time in Vienna**

Average score: 4.3 (range 4 – 5)

Time management was raised as an issue of concern in the pre-conference survey due to the overwhelming number of scheduled sessions and events that the conference offers, the competing number of priorities and responsibilities the project participants were faced with, and various timetable clashes. The Women and AIDS Delegate Guide produced by ATHENA and UNIFEM was found to be a help in organizing which sessions to attend. Not all the participants felt that they had managed to do all they wanted to do, but some found that within these constraints they were able to do an incredible amount, and still have time for some sightseeing!

The one thing that did not add to the challenge of time management was the Twinning Project itself, which made no demands on the participants at all, other than participation in the WNZ session on the Thursday. *'The most important [aspect] of the project was that each participant has been provided with free schedule and choice to attend any session due to her own interest. I was able to see any event I considered most important. But there were so many interesting and attractive events and sessions that it was very hard to manage time and not to miss them all!'* (Aygün).

Some felt that being part of the Twinning Project helped with time management, as joint participation in activities seemed to alleviate stress around time management. The project also incorporated shared informal time together, which was felt to be as useful as the more formal conference sessions, as well as hugely supportive. *'I truly believe that I could not have functioned as well as I did had it not been for the daily debrief sessions with my twin in the evening ... In hindsight, I would have felt lost and overwhelmed without this daily contact of a woman whom I did not know at all and who I really care about now'* (Andrea).

7.2 Organisational Outcomes

- **Rights based responses – methodological learning**

Average score: 4.7 (range 4 – 5)

The AIDS 2010 Conference slogan was 'Rights Here, Right Now!' and the importance of rights-based approaches and rights-based responses was a central advocacy theme to the conference.

Twining project participants varied in the extent to which they were already familiar with varied considerably, but response suggest new learning or deepened understanding on the part of all the Twins who took part in the evaluation. *'It was my first conference was spoken about human rights, so it was all new for me. But there I got all the necessary tools to work in the human rights area'* (Irena).

The Twins spoke of their intentions of applying new methodological tools to work in the areas of prevention and stigma reduction, organizational development, and in fundraising and policy advocacy. *'The human rights based approach as well as the cry for integration of Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights (SRHR) with HIV services really came through for me at this conference. I am now also tasked with integrating SRHR in my own work in preventive HIV vaccine research. This opportunity came because of my involvement in Women Arise and the WNZ'* (Andrea).

- **Knowledge and skills development**

Average score: 4.1 (range 4 – 5)

The respondents reported learning and skills development in abundance and across a broad range of areas from cross-cutting areas like women's access to resources including education, information and services, women's leadership and the role of women in society, to specific issues, such as prevention programmes for young people, TB prevention, and ways to read and analyse reports of research trials. For some the project led to a greater nuanced understanding of issues such as family centred approaches to prevention and changing from using 'mother-to-child transmission' to 'parent-to-child transmission.'

Clearly an important area of learning among the Twinning Project participants related to sharing information about their own countries and contexts, as well as in other parts of the world more generally. *'I learnt about other rights violations in other parts of the world during the conference, like prosecution of sex workers and LGBT communities'* (Wezi).

- **Representation and feedback (to home organisation / community)**

Average score: 4.3 (range 3 – 5)

All the participants had the opportunity to represent their home country communities and organizations at the Twinning Project session held in the WNZ, and through other conference activities, be they formal presentations and meetings, or informal networking opportunities. *'I participated in the meetings of the leaders of Russian NGOs who are the members of the network of AIDS related organisations. We analysed the current situation, discussed the causes of the problems and created some suggestions to renovate our concerted action'* (Marina).

Most of the respondents had found opportunities to share at least some of their conference experiences and learning with colleagues and staff within their organisations if not also the wider HIV community through meetings with organizational partners, support groups, networks and the media, using a press release prepared by GSSG immediately after the conference.

For some the conference experience has had immediate practical application within their organisations and beyond. *'At the moment we are beginning a few new projects, campaigns. IAC gave me new skills, new and useful contacts, self confidence and it helped [me] to work better in HIV [and] human rights issues'* (Irena).

For some of the participants, the launch of WECARe+ has been the focus of feedback and follow up efforts. One participant – Parvina, with the support of her organisation the Centre for Mental Health – has initiated the creation of a Tajik Network of Women living with HIV, as a country-level affiliate of WECARe+.

7.3 Network development outcomes

- **East-West partnership/dialogue/exchange**

Average score: 4.3 (range 3 – 5)

While it was hoped and expected that the AIDS 2010 Conference itself would be a catalyst for East-West exchange in general and open a gateway to East-West collaborations and partnerships at least from within the region, the Twinning Project enabled this exchange to begin at a very personal and powerful level. *'I definitely found the contact with women from the different regions an eye-opener and very enriching for my personal growth'* (Andrea), and there was a strong sense from among the participants that this was more than a passing interest.

Russian women need be more aware how HIV positive women in Germany and other part of Eastern Europe and Asia protect their Human Rights, participate in advocacy process, cope with difficulties and become powerful. Our organisation has long history of cooperation with German NGOs. But it was cooperation between the professionals of AIDS related organisations. HIV positive women who are the clients of our projects usually had been excluded from such process. Participation in the Twinning project helped me recognize the importance of West-East alliance of HIV positive women from different part of Europe and Asia' (Marina)

'The network established among the eastern and western women within [the] Twinning Project was unique and crucial in understanding of each other's context and cultures, sharing of life skills and experience on how affected people survives and struggle with their problems' (Aygün)

For some, these interactions have remained at the level of learning and understanding; for others, they have already led to on-going collaborations and commitments; for others they have inspired goals for future ventures. *'I am yet to figure out on what to do. However, my interest in the East has certainly been ignited and I am wondering how I can get involved' (Andrea).*

- **Meeting new people**

Average score: 5

Meeting new people is almost impossible to avoid at the IAC, and this scored a straight 5 across the participants of the Twinning Project. This has clear implications for personal and professional development, as well as for broader network development. *'Met a great deal of women working and living with HIV and in the sector worldwide. Some of the contacts were being renewed but there were new contacts on both a personal and professional level which I hope to remain in contact with. I also feel that our networks and organisations will continue to expand through some of these contacts' (Wezi).*

Likewise, *'The most significant contacts for me were meetings with HIV positive powerful activists from Germany. On the one hand it was very useful experience personally for me. On the other hand I could see the new opportunity for development of collaboration between HIV positive women of our countries. I recognized that we have resources to begin such partnership now and we have to work to find means to continue it in future' (Marina).*

Many of the Twins declared their intentions to remain in contact during the Twinning session in the WNZ, and the post-conference questionnaires indicated that several of them were still in close and regular contact. The launch of the WECARe+ network to coincide with the Conference also provided a political hook to give momentum to new friendships and in following up contacts made, while these clearly feed into and strengthen the network, thereby giving rise to a 'virtuous cycle' of broader political networking and strengthening of personal relationships. It has also inspired the creation of national level networks to feed into the regional. *'I think that my professional and personal network has expanded since ... we have created the National Women's Network' (Parvina).*

- **Plans for on-going collaborations**

Average score: 3.7 (range 1 – 5)

Several of the Twins have been involved in funding for new networking projects or collaborations that have arisen from their experiences including new contacts made at Vienna. *'Thanks to an opportunity to live with my colleague from Germany I build a partnership with her organization and many others and we have an idea of common project to EU; Thanks to experience received in the conference I improved my skills in fundraising and now I work on new projects to EC and UNAIDS about gender issues' (Tamila).*

Others were already involved in collaborative East-West projects that they feel have been enriched or enhanced through the experiences the Twinning Project afforded them. *'HIV positive women from Sverdlovsk region of Russia will visit Germany in October. It was planned long time before I visit Vienna. Twinning project gave me opportunity to contribute to the new partnership between HIV positive women of our countries. We have arrangements and hope that they will meet in Cologne, share experience and give each other examples of good practice of HIV positive leadership. It could be the first step of the firm partnership' (Marina).*

8. Conclusion

It is difficult to convince funding organizations that individual sponsorship to conferences can make a difference beyond the immediate personal impact that such events may have. The experience of the participants in the Twinning Project illustrates that at the personal level that impact is the greater for having been part of a supportive peer-group that already had links with well-established networks of women working in the same field.

Individuals attending conferences of this size and capacity for the first time (if they are able to find sponsorship at all) as community representatives risk facing cultural and linguistic isolation, as well as finding the experience potentially overwhelming, exhausting and emotionally challenging. The extent to which the benefits of participation feed into the larger organizational context or beyond that into national, regional or international women's organizing around HIV, gender and women's rights, with the potential to affect policy and programming is a nebulous area.

Changes at this level are long term, hard to measure, and even harder to attribute to the single identifiable actions of specific individuals, but rather the result of numerous varied actions and circumstances that come together at particular moments in time. However, the level of commitment, personal interest, experience and potential for leadership already demonstrated by the participants of the Twinning Project, in combination with and enhanced by the support, learning, confidence, growth and personal network development that the Twinning Project provided, certainly suggests a potential for leadership and development that conference participation of this kind can feed into, as a step towards further utilization of those skills and attributes in the AIDS response.