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## THE FRONTLINE BATTLE AGAINST HIV



As World AIDS day approaches, **Stuart Clark** travels to Swaziland to witness the devastating impact the virus is having on the country, and discovers how overseas organisations like **SKILLSHARE INTERNATIONAL IRELAND** are helping Swazis to help themselves. PHOTOS **Gary James McGovern** and **Simon Parry**

**I**t's 5 o'clock on Friday afternoon and hundreds of power-dressed young Swazis are celebrating the end of the working week in Mbabane's Finesse bar.

Snoop Dogg's playing on the hi-fi – they love their gangsta rap round these parts – and pints of imported South African Castle beer are being downed with a relish that wouldn't be out of place at a Pogues gig.

The shopping centre next door, with its Kentucky Fried Chicken, Super Spar and SUVs dotted around the car park, also suggest a country that's not nearly as on its uppers as some relief agencies would have you believe.

"If the only place in Swaziland you visited was Mbabane, you'd think, 'Wow, it's not a whole lot different to Ireland,'" reflects Stephen Donaghy, a Co. Derry native working with the Swaziland Coalition Of Concerned Organizations. "It's an illusion though. Head out of the city and you'll encounter some of the worst poverty imaginable."

That's what we intend to do during this week-long field trip, arranged by Skillshare International Ireland, a non-religious, non-government organisation that also operates in Botswana, Lesotho and Mozambique.

"We're very excited about the visit," Skillshare International Ireland Director Fran Flood enthuses. "It's an exercise in North/South cooperation and learning in

a profound way. The participants have been strategically recruited from organisations here that have much to share and learn from our partner organisations in Swaziland. It's a powerful link."

Skillshare's work in Swaziland is set against the backdrop of the country's HIV infection rate, which at 39.2% is the world's highest. By comparison, Ireland has an HIV infection rate of approximately 0.2%. Almost 400,000 Swazis have contracted the virus, leading to an average life expectancy of 32.

It's also pertinent at this point to mention King Mswati III, the ruling monarch for the past 22 years who's a much-loved hero to some, and a despised dictator to others (see panel overpage). Either way, the Swiss-born monarch is central to every facet of Swazi life.

Skillshare liaises directly with partner NGOs and community based organisations like the Swaziland Action Group Against Abuse (SWAGAA), which has been in operation since 1990 and last year counselled 2,000 victims of rape and sexual violence, along with perpetrators who wish to change their behaviour.

"The laws relating to the protection of women and children date back to 1889 and 1920 and are totally inadequate," rues the head of their HIV/AIDS Support Group, Bheki Dlamini. "To give you an example, there's

PLUS **CASCARINO** ON HARRY REDKNAPP

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His Majesty King Mswati III reviews his troops as seen in *Without The King*, a film by Michael Skolnik

## OPPOSITION TO THE KING MOUNTS

Despite an attempt to crack down on dissidents, opposition to Swaziland's King Mswati III is mounting. *Hot Press* met with some of the country's dissidents.

**A** million bullets, 18,000 handguns and 20,000 grenades. That was the \$3.5 million order sanctioned in May by King Mswati III.

"One million bullets for a population of one million people – it's a chilling statistic," a leading opposition figure, who declines to be named, tells us. "There's no threat to Swaziland from neighbouring countries, so the King must have bought those guns and grenades with the close combat control of his own people in mind."

There are a lot of people who don't want to be identified in a country where criticising the King and his cronies is likely to cost you your job and your relatives their land.

"The Swazi secret police have Google alerts in place," our dissident friend continues, "which means that five minutes after appearing on the 'net there'll be a transcript of this conversation on the King's desk."

Hello your Majesty. Somebody who is prepared to go on the record is Comfort Mabuza, the National Director of the Media Institute of Southern Africa. "Swaziland is rotten from the top down," he insists. "A country that's just elected MPs to its parliament would appear to be democratic, but there are no political parties and the Prime Minister and his Cabinet are appointed by the King."

Who as we speak is a mile down the road meeting with his good friend Robert Mugabe.

"It says a lot about the King that throughout the Zimbabwean crisis he's sided with Mugabe," notes a journalist with the opposition *Times Of Swaziland* newspaper, which got a right Royal ticking off in August for repeating a *Forbes* magazine claim that Mswati III is the world's 15th richest monarch with a personal fortune of \$200 million.

"The issue wasn't the content of the story, but the fact that we embarrassed him by printing it."

The King came in for an even bigger mauling the following month when he lavished an estimated \$15 million on the '40/40' celebrations, which marked his 40th birthday and 40 years of independence from Britain. That's in addition to nine of his 13 wives receiving \$1 million each to go on a pre-party shopping spree in Dubai. "There are some very, very angry people out there," says Comfort Mabuza.

Just how angry is evident from the fact that during the election campaign two men were killed by the premature explosion of a bomb earmarked for one of the King's seven palaces.

The security forces were quick to blame the banned People's United Democratic Movement who, whilst denying involvement, warned that, "There must be a move toward democratic change to stop these bombings. We urge the international community to intensify the pressure on the Swazi government."

Add in reports of two units of Swazi paramilitaries being trained in next-door South Africa, and it's no wonder that there's pessimistic talk in some quarters of impending civil war.

Of course, Swaziland's most immediate problem is that 39.2% HIV infection rate. The King's answer to the crisis was to impose a four-year ban on young Swazis having sex – and then marrying a girl who at 17 was below the country's legal age of consent.

During our stay, we talked to people who'd travelled up to 60km to collect their antiretroviral (ART) drugs from hospital, only to find that they'd run out of supplies. Others who did get their ARTs didn't have enough food to guarantee the full stomachs that are needed if the drugs are to work properly.

One suspects that things will get a lot worse in Swaziland before they get better.

no such thing in Swaziland as rape within marriage. We had a case recently where a man abandoned his family for three years, contracted HIV from the woman he was living with, and then went home and infected his wife by having non-consensual sex with her."

Despite the evangelical free for all that exists in the country – during the 30km drive from the capital Mbabane to SWAGAA's offices in Manzini, I spotted 12 different denominations of church – there's been little in the way of religious leadership.

"What normally happens when a woman goes to a pastor for advice is that they're quoted a passage from the bible, and told to obey and submit to their husbands," Dlamini resumes. "Another big problem is the abuse of children, many of whom are dual orphaned and taken advantage of by adults who gain their trust by offering them gifts and money. The lack of state support forces them into dangerous situations."

With DNA testing yet to arrive in Swaziland, and a minor's testimony requiring adult corroboration, the odds in sex offence cases are stacked in the accused's favour. SWAGAA do their best to even things up by providing free legal advice and transport to court – a huge help in a country where 77% of the population are living on less than \$2 a day.

What'll really level the playing field though is if the recommendations they've made to the Attorney General are adopted as part of a proposed new Sexual Offences and Domestic Violence Bill.

Among the other offences currently not recognised in Swaziland are sexual harassment; maintaining a sexual relationship with a child that doesn't include penetration; and the rape of an adult/underage male, which is treated as the lesser charge of indecent assault.

While the legislature drags its heels – the new Bill was mooted for earlier this year but so far nothing has made it onto the statute books – SWAGAA, aided by €582,210 worth of Skillshare Ireland funding, are doing their best to improve the lot of ordinary Swazis who can't afford to be supping pints of Castle on a Friday afternoon in Finesse.

"It's a three-year programme designed to broaden the scope of SWAGAA's work," explains Fran Flood. "75% of the cost comes from Irish Aid, which is the Government's programme of assistance to developing countries, and we have to go and find the rest. Our ethos is that all of our projects have to fit within the national government policy of the host country. We wouldn't want to undermine or contradict them in any way.

"We have a strong localisation policy," he expands, "which means we only recruit full-time paid workers from the country our projects are running in. On top of that, we have international volunteers on what are usually two-year contracts who are recruited to fill a role that's been identified by a host organisation like SWAGAA or the Swaziland National Network of People Living with HIV and AIDS (SWANNEPHA)."

The poverty Stephen Donaghy's warned us about is grimly apparent as we journey to Mahlanya to visit one of the schools where SWAGAA runs its weekly Girls Empowerment clubs. The school itself is in a fairly good state of repair thanks to the generosity of benefactors. Not so the nearby houses – or to be more accurate shacks, none of which have electricity or running water.

A third of them don't have any adults living in them either, with 245 of Mahlanya Community Primary School's 645 pupils orphaned as a result of AIDS.

With the state only paying half of their fees – there's no free education in Swaziland – it's common for orphans to be kicked out of the schools they've been attending, and no alternative provided.

"Some of the older ones, boys and girls, will drift into prostitution," notes SWAGAA's Girl Empowerment Educator, Busisiwe Ntsele.

The going rate for sex without a condom in Mbabane's ramshackle red light districts is €15 – cheap for what is a virtual death sentence.

Another risk to orphans is the belief among some Swazis that AIDS can be cured by having sex with a virgin – hence the almost daily reports in the *Times Of Swaziland* and its rival *Swazi Observer* of children as young as three and four being raped.

"A lot of kids are abused at home by relatives who take advantage of their situation, and give them money to keep them quiet," Ntsele resumes. "They can't speak out because they're



(Left to right) A SWANNEPHA shoemaking project in Nhlanguano; Nonhlanhla Dlamini; the Dwaleni women's group; and Stuart Clark's pet tarantula

now the head of the household, and need that money to look after their younger brothers and sisters. We want to let them know there's an alternative to that."

Thanks to the generosity of teachers prepared to put in almost double the hours they're paid for, nobody gets turned away at the school gates in Mahlanya – a badge of honour for their principle who describes Skillshare International Ireland and SWAGAA's engagement with her pupils as "life saving."

Inside one of the prefab classrooms, Busisiwe Ntsele is leading 50 girls of mixed ages through the shouted "We're here because we're special – the sky's the limit!" call and response, which starts and ends all Girl Empowerment club meetings.

The smiles on young faces suggest they're something that's looked forward to rather than being the equivalent of double maths. The focus of today's 45-minute session is a play members have written about a young girl being raped by an older boy, which leaves her both pregnant and HIV positive. The mood is lightened when one of the young leads dissolves into giggles, and everyone ends up giving everyone else a hug. Outside of the meetings themselves, SWAGAA provides a comprehensive support network that the girls can access whenever they need to.

We get to experience a very different side of Skillshare Ireland and SWAGAA's work the following day when we travel later to Ngculwini, a hilltop village, currently suffering a severe drought. There's an underground spring that would solve their problems, but the government's not prepared to cough up the \$1,300 needed to sink a well. What water they do have is polluted by faeces from the cattle they rear.

We're here for a men's discussion group, which – as is the way in rural Swaziland – can only take place with the blessing of the local Chief whose half-built outhouse it's taking place in.

SWAGAA's Male Involvement Educator Bheki Vilane informs us that it's a rare honour for outsiders to be allowed into the meetings, which are attended by everyone from teenagers in counterfeit Manchester United shirts to old fellas in traditional cowskin garb.

Top of today's agenda is the 70-year-old pastor who raped, impregnated and infected a 14-year-old parishioner with HIV. Confronted by her parents, he suggested selling the baby and splitting the proceeds – a plan scuppered by the infant dying shortly after birth. "We should kill him!" one man tells us through an interpreter – English is the language of Swazi officialdom but most people speak Siswati – while another suggests we pray for the pastor's salvation and gets a mouthful of abuse from the other men for his trouble.

"Before SWAGAA started these meetings, we never got together and talked openly like this," one of the Man U supporters tells us afterwards. "The message is that our women are precious, and we should treat them with respect rather than violence."

As well as organising an additional 70 monthly meetings like the one in Ngculwini, SWAGAA last year initiated the 'Good Man of the Year'

competition, which might sound like something out of *Father Ted* but has been hugely successful in getting people to talk about a previously taboo subject.

Having survived the trauma of discovering a big, hairy Tarantula in my hotel bathroom – the "it's more scared of you than you are of it" line from reception frankly didn't wash – it's off the following morning to see another example of the work Skillshare International Ireland and SWAGAA are doing at community level.

We have no reason to expect our arrival in Dwaleni – it translates as "on the rock" – to be anything other than low-key, but disembarking from our bus after another dirt-track marathon, 30 very excited ladies launch into their repertoire of gospel songs. This very vocal welcome lasts until we sit down on the floor of

"I had to wait six hours yesterday to meet the King, but when I did I told him that the Government previously has betrayed us, and I intend to pursue new legislation dealing with gender violence," she tells *Hot Press*. "They always say things are in the pipeline – well, I've come in to clear the pipe! I also talked to him about the issues of corruption, poverty and food supply. We've had several spells of drought recently causing harvests to fail, so that's a major consideration."

This Skillshare International Ireland field-trip has been designed with more than just observing in mind, and so it proves to be with the groups we're meeting eager to trade ideas and experiences with their counterparts from Access Ireland, Dóchas – The Irish Association of Development NGOs, Ballybane

## "THE MESSAGE IS THAT OUR WOMEN ARE PRECIOUS, AND WE SHOULD TREAT THEM WITH RESPECT RATHER THAN VIOLENCE."

the half-built house where they gather every week.

The building is a gift from the local Chief who, as in Ngculwini, had to give his approval for SWAGAA to start their meetings in the village.

"The men were worried at first about us meeting up, but they've seen the good that's come out of it and are now very supportive," one woman says.

Members put 25 cents a week into a communal fund, which is used for the bulk buying of food and presents for the kids at Christmas. With several hundred dollars in the kitty, they're now looking to start a small poultry business.

Monetary considerations aside, the therapeutic benefit of these ladies, most of whom are affected by HIV, coming together like this is enormous.

There's great excitement that the outgoing SWAGAA Director, Nonhlanhla Dlamini, has been elected an MP for the first time.

Community Development Project, Mayo Rape Crisis Centre, Men Overcoming Violence (MOVE) Ireland, Rape Crisis Network Ireland, Tallaght Intercultural Action and Tuam Community Development Resource Centre.

"It's hugely important that the Swazi organisations don't feel isolated," Fran Flood resumes. "We're confident that this field-trip is going to lead to some long-term relationships between the Irish participants and the groups on the ground there."

As our contribution to this cultural exchange, *Hot Press* has dispatched a St. Patrick's Athletic strip to the lads in Mbabane's Tink Big bar who are furnishing us with an Eleven Men In Flight F.C. – yes, that's really their name – jersey in return. Swazis are majorly into their football, with an unofficial day of mourning called last month when a 6-0 thrashing by Togo

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## THE NUMBERS GAME

- There are currently **95,000** orphaned Swazi children – a figure expected to rise to **120,000** by the time the 2010 World Cup kicks off in neighbouring South Africa.
- **63%** of 18 to 24-year-old females have experienced some form of sexual violence.
- **10%** of Swazis control **80%** of its wealth.
- **16,000** Swazis died in 2006 of HIV/AIDS.
- An estimated **€38 million** has been spent in the past two years on the King's seven palaces. No one knows for sure because they're strictly off-limits to the public.
- The government has recently passed **37** pieces of repressive anti-media legislation.
- Because of public transport costs rising **50%** in the last year, a lot of people living with HIV can't afford to travel to hospital for their antiretroviral (ART) drugs.
- According to the Millennium Challenge Corporation, a bilateral development fund announced by the Bush administration, **Swaziland** is the **11th** most oppressive regime in the world with "fewer civil liberties than Zimbabwe and Cuba."

ended the national side's hopes of reaching the 2010 World Cup finals in South Africa.

Back in the non-sporting world, Skillshare International Ireland are constantly battling to find money to keep their projects going. It's a problem shared by their parent Skillshare International organisation who are also operational in Kenya, Namibia, South Africa, Tanzania and India. Fundraising was tough before the credit crunch, but now they've got to contend with the 'charity begins at home' brigade.

"It's an unfortunate expression, which almost seems to blame people for the poverty they're in," Fran Flood reflects. "There are difficult problems in Ireland – I've worked in the areas of homelessness and drug abuse here myself – but it shouldn't be seen as one weighing against the other.

"It's estimated that 800 million people in the developing world live on a less than \$1 a day. 30,000 children die every day from malnutrition and poverty. 40% of children in Sub-Saharan Africa risk permanent physical or mental impairment due to malnutrition. That puts what we're talking about into context.

"There's a proud history of the people of Ireland supporting the developing world and, in particular, Africa, supplying development workers and funding and I think that will continue," Flood states. "In terms of the budget last month, the Minister of State For Overseas Development, Peter Parker, and the Government are to be commended for underwriting the commitment to 0.7% of GNP going to overseas aid by the year 2012. Even in these troubled times, that represents the will of the people."

The other oft-voiced concern is that money raised in Ireland is either blown on high administrative costs, or skimmed off by corrupt governments before it gets to the people who need it.

"Our work with SWACAA, for instance, is essentially a three-year business plan that's meticulously followed. We have Skillshare offices in the countries where the programmes are running, and get detailed financial and narrative reports on a quarterly basis.

"As for our own costs," he continues, "a maximum of 20% goes on administration, wages and the running of our overseas offices."

Fran Flood's belief that the first world has a duty to assist the developing one has some heavyweight historical backing.

"There's a quotation from John F. Kennedy's inaugural address in January 1961," he concludes, "which is: 'To those peoples in the huts and villages across the globe struggling to break the bonds of mass misery, we pledge our best efforts to help them help themselves for whatever period is required. Not because the communists are doing it. Not because we seek their votes. But because it is right. If a free society cannot help the many that are poor, it cannot save the few who are rich.' 48 years on, those words still hold true."

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To donate to Skillshare International Ireland or apply for a volunteer post see [www.skillshare.ie](http://www.skillshare.ie). See more photos from Stuart Clark's visit to Swaziland on [hotpress.com](http://hotpress.com)