The Njala University Public Health Association (NUPHA) last Thursday collaborated with the international charity World Vision, Bo in an interactive dialogue to commemorate this year’s World AIDS Day on December 1st. The interactive dialogue which took place at the grounds of the SOS Village in Torwama, in the Tinkonko chiefdom drew hundreds of youths and young adults of the SOS village school, community elders students of the Njala University School in what could be described in a frank and open dialogue on issues bordering on HIV/AIDS. Chairman of the occasion Mr. Abubakarr S Kamara-lecturer attached to the Department of Public Health, Njala University encouraged the participants to be very attentive and cooperative as the matters to be discussed are very educating and sensitive/ Kamara said HIV/AIDS affect everybody in society and the community and no one remain exempted from being infected. The Vice President NUPHA Malcolm Vandy-Tarawalie making a statement of youths and HIV/AIDS informed the audience that youths remain the largest population to be affected with the disease because of the type of behaviours youths engaged in. Vandy-Tarawalie explained in detail the various transmission methods of HIV and warned youths to desist from behaviours which put them at increased risk of being infected with the virus. Marion Dumbuya while speaking on the topic HIV/AIDS and the girl child noted that women and the girl are more susceptible to HIV infection than their male counterparts simply because of their anatomy and the numerous mother-role women engage in. She encouraged participating mothers in the interactive dialogue to be open and free to talk sex to their daughters who have reached the age of puberty. Mr. Sulaiman Mandoh noted while discussing the role of stigma during HIV infection that stigma plays an important role when someone is diagnosed positive with HIV. He said many people when they knew that their friend or even relative is HIV positive he or she will treat the person as if the HIV positive person is not an individual. Mandoh said there has been documented cases were husbands divorce their wives simple because she is positive with the virus. During the question and answer section participants were given opportunity to freely ask question regarding HIV and AIDS. Some of the question asked including but not restricted to; the time when HIV/AIDS was discovered in the world and Sierra Leone, the name of the discoverer of HIV, the country in which the virus was first discovered, what are the most frequent ways for one to become infected with HIV, whether female genital mutilation is the commonest ways for HIV transmission among female. In his keynote address, NUPHA founder and Director Jia Kangbai who is also a lecturer attached to the Njala University Public Health Department cautioned that should the world achieve zero new infection for HIV by 2015 as depicted in this year’s theme more need to be done to break the role of stigma attached to HIV and AIDS. Kangbai says that because of stigma many people keep refusing to come out and get tested and hence do not know their status he said if one doesn’t know his or her status, that person is not safe since he or she will not know when or if to start ARV treatment-which is a life saving treatment. The Director also calls for a paradigm shift in relation to the people who are infected with HIV. He said initially when HIV became a disease of public health importance many people though the disease only affects the poorest of the poor. The situation has now changed with equally more rich and wealthy people being infected with HIV like poor people Kangbai noted while adding that HIV/AIDS have now become a disease of affluence and urbane living. The Director said an ongoing research by NUPHA has discovered that 44 countries for which data on literacy, wealth and HIV/AIDS prevalence have been collected so far have indicate a negative correlation between wealth, literacy and HIV and opined that wealth and literacy in the absence of redistributive government policies cannot be translated in sound health and more wealth as was
previously thought. Kangbai concluded that in fact nowadays wealth and literacy can actually reinforce behaviours that put people to increased risk for becoming infected with HIV. He promised NUPHA will continue with such interactive dialogue as the association continue its sensitization and awareness raising activities on public health issues in Sierra Leone. for their part, the World Vision Area Base program coordinator Mr Sulaiman Bah said World Vision is happy to have partnered with NUPHA in coordinating this interactive dialogue and bring HIV/AIDS message to the people of Torwama community and SOS Village in particular. He asked the participants to put into practiced what they have learnt during the interactive dialogue forum and promised that World Vision is always prepared to work with NUPHA on public health issues in their operational areas. The SOS Village headman Mr. Conteh said he is elated for hosting NUPHA and Wold Vision for this interactive dialogue and call on the two partners to always feel free to partner with SOS on sensitive issues like HIV/AIDS. 

An SOS student asking a question 

Food and time
Marion Dumbuya (NUPHA) delivering her statement on HIV/AIDS and the girl child

Kindergarten student posing a question about HIV/AIDS

Some members of the high table
Some members of NUPHA listening attentively

NUPHA members posed for photos

NUPHA’s female volleyball team distributing condoms after the match