

Press release

UNAIDS calls for exceptional and urgent action on AIDS

UNAIDS meets in the epicentre of the epidemic

Lusaka, 8 December 2006 – Many countries in eastern and southern Africa face an exceptional challenge of ‘hyper epidemics’ with more than 15% of their adult populations living with HIV.

Eastern and southern Africa are at the epicentre of the epidemic with more than 70% of people living with HIV and 71% of AIDS-related deaths in sub-Saharan Africa occurring in this region.

There are positive signs in a small number of countries of declining infection rates in Zimbabwe and Kenya and amongst youth in countries such as Zambia. In many countries of the region, including those most affected such as Botswana and South Africa, there is a steady increase in HIV infection rates. An alarming recent trend is increasing epidemics in countries that previously recorded declines in HIV infection rates, such as Uganda.

Speaking at the 19th UNAIDS Programme Coordinating Board meeting the Executive Director of UNAIDS, Dr Peter Piot, called for an exceptional response to turn the epidemic around in the region.

“I am increasingly convinced that just expanding programmes, doing more, even much more is not going to stop this epidemic in eastern and southern Africa,” Dr Piot said. “To reach universal access to HIV prevention and treatment in this region, we need to pay attention to the drivers of this epidemic particularly gender inequality and the social, economic and cultural norms. This will not only require bold and courageous national leadership, but also that all development partners place HIV as our top concern. We should ask ourselves that whatever we do: does it pass the AIDS test for an effective response? ”

Meeting in Lusaka, Zambia, the 19th UNAIDS Programme Coordinating Board (PCB) brought together representatives from government, civil society, donors and the United Nations to push for greater UN action to strengthen country efforts.

The Board urged countries to ‘know your epidemic’ and insisted on the need for comprehensive HIV prevention responses that adequately address the factors that make people vulnerable to HIV infection.

The Board appealed to national governments and donors to ensure that AIDS is accounted for in humanitarian emergencies. In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), 67 women are raped everyday, with sexual violence used as a weapon of war that increases their risk of HIV infection by 2 – 5 times. This humanitarian crisis is further exacerbated by a devastated health system that undermines the right of people to prevention, treatment, care and support. The recent democratic transition in the DRC provides a window of hope that this ongoing tragedy will finally be stopped.

It praised the progress made by countries in setting their own universal access targets; however it expressed concern regarding the meaningful involvement of civil society in the target setting process at the country level. The Board insisted that UNAIDS use its facilitating role to work with national authorities and civil society for a stronger national response.

In relation to UN reform the Board insisted that the Executive Heads of the UNAIDS Cosponsors and the Secretariat establish Joint UN Country Teams on AIDS. Dr Piot appealed to donors to “only fund AIDS activities by UN agencies in countries if these are part of joint programmes that provide serious accountability”.

The Board called for greater coordination and accountability by all partners, national, international, UN agencies and the Global Fund for AIDS, TB and Malaria to improve the quality, scope and effectiveness of national and international partnerships in support of national AIDS responses and endorsed the UNAIDS Strategic Framework to provide strategic direction to UNAIDS for the next four years.

The Programme Coordinating Board is the governing board of UNAIDS bringing together representatives of governments, civil society, the UN system and other international organizations to provide strategic direction to the work of UNAIDS and its cosponsors.

The 20th meeting of the UNAIDS Programme Coordinating Board will take place from 26-27 June 2007 in Geneva, Switzerland.

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