

HIV THREATENS STABILITY OF AFRICAN FAMILIES

Increased efforts in prevention and treatment are needed to reverse the trend

Abuja, Nigeria, 6 December 2005 – Cosponsor organizations and partners of the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) today called on all Africans including governments, communities, people living with HIV and AIDS and individuals to take ownership and unite in the response to AIDS in Africa.

Representatives said that AIDS is rapidly taking its toll on African families – the backbone and safety net in African society. Sub-Saharan Africa has just over 10% of the world's population but is home to more than sixty percent of all people living with HIV or just more than 25 million people. In 2005, 3.2 million people were newly infected with HIV, representing 64% of all new infections globally, while 2.4 million adults and children died of AIDS. It is estimated that approximately 12.3 million children have lost one or both parents to AIDS.

Increasing new infections and deaths related to AIDS are undermining the capacity of African families to cope as it depletes their economic and physical resources resulting in deepened poverty, increased food insecurity.

“Every person living with HIV is part of a family and we know that AIDS is placing the African family under greater pressure than ever before”, said Michel Sidibe, Director of the Country and Regional Department for the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS). “We are seeing progress in some countries, with evidence of HIV declines. We must all learn from these gains and ensure that families have access to the HIV prevention tools and HIV treatment they need to enable us to get ahead of the epidemic.”

In sub-Saharan Africa women are particularly affected by the epidemic with 77% of all women living with HIV globally being found in this region. In some countries, up to eight out of ten young people between the ages of 15 – 24 living with HIV are young women.

To ensure adequate action for women and girls, AIDS programmes should focus on those aspects that enable women and girls to avoid infection and obtain treatment. These include education, knowledge about HIV and AIDS, protection from violence and economic security. Programmes and services targeting male attitudes, sexual and reproductive health also need to be increased.

The response to help children and young people infected and affected by AIDS has been particularly slow.

In 2005, AIDS killed more than half a million (570,000) children mostly through mother-to-child transmission. While mother-to-child transmission has been virtually eliminated from industrialized countries and service coverage is improving in many other places, it still falls

far short in most of sub-Saharan Africa. In 30 African countries with the highest HIV prevalence, only 5% of pregnant women are able to access drugs that prevent transmission of HIV to their children.

There are encouraging signs in a number of countries that young people have heeded the call to action. This is reflected by increased condom usage, a reduction in sexual partners and delays in the first time that they have sex.

The United Nations stresses that in order to sustain these gains prevention and treatment programmes need to be urgently increased in scale and scope.

Access to HIV treatment has improved markedly over the past two years. Over one million people in low and middle income countries are now receiving life-prolonging antiretroviral drugs. But despite this progress, at best only one in ten people living with HIV in sub-Saharan Africa in need of treatment are receiving it. Among children needing treatment, less than 5% have access.

Failure to prevent new infections and to provide treatment to those in need will result in further increases in the number of children left vulnerable and orphaned by AIDS.

“While children are the central part of every family, they are clearly not at the center of the international AIDS response,” said Rima Salah, UNICEF Deputy Executive Director. “Only a tiny fraction of infected children is receiving treatment and many die before even reaching their first birthday. In sub-Saharan Africa, millions of children who have lost their parents to AIDS are missing out on a childhood, are missing out on an education and are missing out on life-saving medicines. We must all unite against AIDS in Africa and accelerate our response to help African families.”

UNAIDS cosponsors UNICEF and other partners have recently launched UNITE FOR CHILDREN, UNITE AGAINST AIDS Campaign pushing for a faster response to help children and young people to prevent HIV, to ensure that mothers can prevent transmission of HIV to their unborn child, to ensure pediatric treatment for children in need and provide for the needs of children orphaned or made vulnerable by AIDS.

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