

Commission on AIDS in the Pacific

HIV risks spreading further in the Pacific unless countries scale up their AIDS response

Violence against women, stigma, and unprotected sex continue to fuel HIV, according to new report

United Nations, New York, 2 December 2009 – The HIV epidemic in the Pacific region risks spreading further due to high rates of sexually transmitted infections, unsafe sex, violence against women, stigma and discrimination, and weak health systems. The number of young people living with HIV is steadily rising and young women are becoming infected earlier than young men in the region. These findings are contained in the first report published by the Commission on AIDS in the Pacific entitled, *Turning the tide: an OPEN strategy for a response to AIDS in the Pacific*.

The Commission's report highlights the key challenges that are blocking the AIDS response in the Pacific, and recommends decisive steps that countries in the region should take to protect their societies, cultures and economies from HIV. It will be presented today by the Commission Chairman, the Honourable Misa Telefoni Retzlaff, to United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon at a UN event in New York.

According to the report, the Pacific region has a potent mix of risks and vulnerabilities to HIV. Gender inequality and gender-based violence are major drivers of HIV and sexually transmitted infections in the Pacific. There is evidence of connections between alcohol, drugs, unsafe sex and HIV across the region. Unprotected commercial and transactional sex and male-to-male sex are also key risks, and are often hidden and denied. Many men who have sex with men often also have sex with women, thus greatly increasing the risk of HIV infection in the wider population. Mobility and migration within and beyond the region pose another significant vulnerability.

In addition, many countries in the region have outdated legislation that discriminates against many people living with HIV. "Punitive laws are a significant barrier to effective HIV prevention and our response to AIDS," said United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon. "We must uphold the rights of all people living with HIV. In particular, countries in the region must repeal laws that fuel stigma and discrimination against men who have sex with men, sex workers and injecting drug users."

As the Pacific region is home to diverse HIV epidemics, countries must fund HIV programmes that will make the most impact and save lives. In Papua New Guinea, which bears the brunt of the epidemic in the region, programmes that empower women and reduce their vulnerability to HIV are urgently needed given that women account for 60% of reported HIV infections.

The report also indicates that funding for HIV activities in the region increased more than five-fold between 2001 and 2009, and more than US\$ 77 million was available for HIV activities in 2008. However, the cost of implementing HIV programmes in the Pacific is high due to the cultural and linguistic diversity, limited and expensive transport networks

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and a poor communications infrastructure. These factors make it more challenging to provide quality health and social services throughout the region.

"AIDS in the Pacific should not be seen as a burden which is diverting resources way from other priorities," said the Honourable Misa Telefoni Retzlaff, Chairman of the Commission on AIDS in the Pacific. "AIDS is an opportunity for development and for addressing inequalities, inequities and injustices in our societies. In crafting a new and effective response to HIV and AIDS, we have an opportunity to widen rights and access to essential social services and to ensure that all people are regarded as important and cherished members of our communities."

The report has outlined concrete recommendations for Pacific countries to scale up their AIDS response. These include strengthening health systems, overcoming stigma and discrimination, creating a safe environment for people living with HIV, strengthening country surveillance and developing a strong evidence base, and better aligning regional and international support with national priorities.

"The Pacific region has a unique opportunity to achieve universal access to HIV prevention, treatment care and support," said Michel Sidibé, Executive Director of UNAIDS. "Governments, civil society and people living with HIV must come together to scale up the AIDS movement that is informed by evidence and grounded in human rights. The AIDS response must become a catalyst to achieve the Millennium Development Goals in the region."

In light of the current global economic crisis and the uncertainty of long-term funding for HIV, countries in the region must "do more with less" and ensure more efficient use of existing resources by focusing on more cost-effective interventions. At the same time, countries must progressively increase domestic funding of HIV programmes in order to reduce dependence on external assistance, states the report.

An estimated 54,000 people were living with HIV in the Pacific in 2008, of which 5,162 were new infections. Excluding Australia and New Zealand, Papua New Guinea accounted for more than 99% of reported HIV cases in the region in 2007. Outside of Papua New Guinea, the island nations of New Caledonia, Fiji, French Polynesia and Guam account for the vast majority of HIV infections.

The Commission on AIDS in the Pacific was created in October 2007 to examine the scale of the HIV epidemic in the region. The Commission also examined how the Pacific's response has changed over the past decade and how this momentum can be strengthened.

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