Press Release

Prioritizing Male Sexual Health in Asia Pacific

Region-wide coalition addressing HIV and AIDS among men who have sex with men launched

22 August, Colombo – A groundbreaking coalition aiming to build, strengthen, and increase interventions addressing HIV-related vulnerabilities of men who have sex with men (MSM) in the Asia and Pacific region was launched at the 8th International Congress on AIDS in Asia and Pacific (8th ICAAP).

The Asia Pacific Coalition on Male Sexual Health (APCOM), an autonomous, regional coalition of civil society groups, government sector representatives, donors, technical experts and the United Nations system, plans to conduct targeted advocacy with stake holders, including governments and donors to improve the HIV policy framework, increase investment and evidenced-based research, scale up programs, as well as the promotion of individual rights of MSM and transgenders.

Despite evidence establishing male-to-male sex as one driving force of HIV transmission in Asia and Pacific region, relatively few MSM interventions strategically focus on prevention, treatment, care and support for MSM and transgender populations. It is estimated by many groups, including UNAIDS, that targeted prevention programmes reach less than 8% of MSM although up to one third of all HIV cases in the Asia Pacific region are transmitted via sex between males.

Furthermore, almost half (45 per cent) of countries have laws in place that actually hinder the access of most-at-risk groups to HIV prevention and treatment services. And, analysis of National AIDS budgets indicates that even countries with concentrated epidemics often fail to allocate meaningful resources to programmes that specifically address the needs of the populations at highest risk of HIV infection.

“How long can we remain silent spectators in the face of such neglect, particularly when the population at risk is so big in number?” asked Prasada Rao, Director, UNAIDS Regional Support Team in Asia. “Male to male sex is being treated as if it does not exist. The reality is male to male sex occurs in all countries and cultures.”

Aiming to strengthen sub-regional and national networks, and communities of MSM and their organizations, particularly those with fewer resources and within disproportionately adversely affected communities, ACPOM will also identify and facilitate the provision of technical assistance, as well as convene governments, researchers, donors and civil society organizations to collaborate in initiating or expanding comprehensive responses to prevent and treat HIV, improve sexual health, and reduce stigma and discrimination in Asia and the Pacific.

“We can only truly address the challenge of HIV, as well as confront stigma, discrimination, violence and social exclusion of MSM and transgenders, if we all work together in our collective, region wide struggle to reduce the personal, medical and social burden of HIV our communities and societies face,” stated Shivananda Khan, APCOM interim Chair and CEO of Naz Foundation International.

Opened to regional and sub-regional networks, as well as national networks and individual organizations, APCOM will be governed by a 19-member Governing Board comprised of community representatives from 7 sub-regions of Asia Pacific, including the Pacific (including New Zealand), South Asia (including Mongolia and excluding India), Greater Mekong (GMS), South East Asia (excluding GMS), Developed Asia (Japan, South Korea, Singapore, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Australia), China and India. In addition, the board will consist of representatives from the transgender community, government sector, donors and a communication advisor. UNAIDS, UNDP and UNESCO will support APCOM as technical advisors.

APCOM is a direct outcome of the Male Sexual Health and HIV in Asia and the Pacific International Consultation held in New Delhi in late 2006. This 3-day consultation brought together community members, government officials, policy makers and researchers to provide an opportunity to inform and develop strategic advocacy initiatives on key policy issues concerning MSM and the transgender community.

The International Humanist Institute for Cooperation with Developing Countries (HIVOS) and UNAIDS have provided initial support for APCOM.

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