

The Node,

... from which a leaf arises from a stem



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Funding on HIV programmes and the Asian Economic Crisis

Global HIV situation

Ninety-five percent of people with HIV/AIDS are living in developing countries. Between 1990 and 1997, the number of people living with HIV had more than tripled, from around 9.8 million to 30.3 million worldwide. Every minute, six young people under 25 years of age are infected with the virus. Last year alone, over 3 million children and young people were infected with HIV. The situation in Asia also reached alarming level. Of the 7.2 million people living with HIV/AIDS in the region, one-fifth were infected last year alone with more than half of all new infections occurring amongst those under 25.

Financial support for the fight against AIDS

To assess the implementation and monitoring of the global response to HIV/AIDS, Programme Coordinating Board (PCB) of the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) recommended its Secretariat in 1997 to study the funding of the national response to HIV/AIDS in developing countries and countries in transition.

The study examined the expenditures of 15 donor countries, the European Commission and 7 United Nations organisations on their national, regional and international efforts to address HIV/AIDS, as well as 64 developing countries' national HIV/AIDS spending for the years 1996 and 1997. This provided a baseline on which to build a financial monitoring system for national and international HIV/AIDS financing.

The Disparities

Approximately three-quarters of the world HIV-positive population living in these 64 countries were included in this study. The report indicated that AIDS funding has not suffered the same declines as overall development assistance during the past few years but the amount allocated for it has remained small (less than 1% of donor countries' annual Official Development Assistance). The proportion of HIV/AIDS funding by the national governments varied widely from less than 10% in 29 of the 64 respondent countries to 78% in 2 of the countries, namely Brazil and Thailand. There were large differences in spending on HIV/AIDS healthcare activities amongst countries, which often did not relate to severity of the epidemic or ability to pay, as measured by per-capita gross national product. These findings highlighted the fact that countries need both political and financial weight to mount effective HIV/AIDS programmes. There were however limitations of the study especially on tracking HIV/AIDS resources being integrated in broader programmes, such as maternal and child health, and education. As HIV/AIDS is currently the fourth main killer globally, more resources should be

allocated to it taking into account the magnitude of its problem to our society. Unless more is invested on it, the situation is likely to get much worse.

Economic crisis in Asia

The problems are further deepened in Asia as the recent financial crisis exerted more pressure on the Asian governments to reduce spending, especially in terms of health and education. Young people bear the brunt as they are usually financially worst off. The booming economy over the previous years in some Asian countries has attracted many young people from villages or country areas to move and seek work in cities. When there are economic downturns as in this year, many people were made redundant and forced to return home. This creates a scenario of reverse-migration with people who lived in cities where there is high prevalence of HIV and STD (Sexually Transmissible Diseases), spreading diseases to rural areas. Those unemployed who decided to remain in cities, may be tempted into the sex industry or drug abuse. According to a study in Thailand (UNAIDS Press Release, April 1999), 50% of prostitutes entered the flesh trade because of their parents' financial need.

The way ahead

Preventing HIV infection is best achieved through education and behavioural modification. The collaboration among the government, non-governmental organisations and the private sectors will provide better resource management for a more comprehensive and effective response to the HIV/AIDS epidemics. There should also be more emphasis on care and counselling for people with HIV/AIDS to prepare them for any discrimination they are likely to encounter, which is a widespread problem in Asia. Denial and ignorance about the disease will hinder the success of any programme on prevention of HIV/AIDS.

Communities should provide children and young people the support, skill and information they need in order to avoid or cope with situations that will make them vulnerable to HIV infection. The 1999 World AIDS Campaign "Listen, Learn and Live" focuses on communication with children and young people. It builds on the momentum generated by two years of advocacy, featured children living in a world with HIV/AIDS in the 1997 campaign to the 1998 campaign, which highlighted young people as a force for change.

Resources are always scarce especially in recent economic turmoil faced by most Asian countries. However, countries should spare no efforts in allocating sufficient funds for HIV prevention. "Investments today in HIV prevention will continue to pay off for generations to come", said Dr. Piot, Executive Director of UNAIDS.

The above is abstracted and adapted from UNAIDS briefing document issued on April 2 and 22, 99. The original papers could be obtained at Red Ribbon Centre or UNAIDS websites.

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