

Press Release

For immediate release

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Experts from the Southern African Development Community (SADC) member states develop Regional Guidelines for Minimum Standards for HIV and AIDS, TB, HEPATITIS AND STI prevention, treatment, care and support in prisons in the SADC Region

Johannesburg, 24 November - The SADC region is at the epicentre of HIV and AIDS, and Tuberculosis (TB) epidemics. Generally, rates of these diseases are higher in the prison population than in the general population. Over the past five years and based on various reports, the prevalence of HIV in African prisons has ranged from 6 to 50 times higher than outside prisons (Human Rights Watch 2006, UNODC 2008). The situation is particularly critical in the SADC region which is also host to some of the highest imprisonment rates and largest prison populations in Africa. It is also recognized that most prisoners remain in prison for relatively short periods of time and ultimately return to their communities. Communicable diseases in prisons thus pose as serious public health threat.

The high rates of HIV and other communicable diseases in prisons is attributed to the relatively poor quality of health services delivered to the prison sector and poor physical environment that includes inadequate diet, poor ventilation, poor sanitation and severe overcrowding . These factors, combined with recognition that high risk behaviours for transmission of HIV and other communicable diseases do take place in prisons, predispose both prisoners and staff to communicable diseases transmission and acquisition.

It is therefore fundamental to ensure that prisons do not become incubators of communicable diseases but rather that prisons contribute positively to the efforts to control communicable diseases in the general population - good prison health is good community health.

Mandiaye Niang, UNODC Regional Representative for Southern Africa, said that “The United Nations, and UNODC specifically, is continually engaged in efforts to improve conditions in prisons and other closed settings. An important database of guiding documents has been developed to assist governments in improving the prisons conditions”.

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UNODC Southern Africa

1059 Schoeman Street, 1st & 2nd Floor | P.O. Box 12673, Hatfield 0028, Pretoria, South Africa

Tel: +27 12 432 0820 | Fax: +27 12 342 2356

Email: fo.southafrica@unodc.org | Web: <http://www.unodc.org/southernafrica>

One of the earliest guiding documents is the **Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners**, which emphasise the need to recognize the prisoner’s fundamental civil, political, social, economic and cultural rights irrespective of their detainee or prisoner situation, implying a duty of the state to guarantee the access to medical and health care, social assistance, and also the right to adequate standard of living for the prisoners.

These global Minimum Standards provided the basis for the **Regional Minimum Standards for HIV and AIDS, TB, HEPATITIS AND STI prevention, treatment, care and support in prisons in the SADC Region**. SADC and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime convened 70 experts from 14 SADC Member States to discuss these Minimum Standards. The Regional Minimum Standards cover multiple areas, such as: the prison environment, treatment, care and support options for the specific communicable diseases, as well as the needs of special groups, such as juveniles, women and disabled people.

The National Commissioner of the South African Department of Correctional Services, Tom Moyane, asked in his opening address of the Workshop: *“I know we have numerous competing demands on our respective public funds; we must ask the question – what is the value of investing in all other areas and neglect this fight against HIV and AIDS when all that investment can be eroded by this pandemic when it ravages the most productive sectors of our society?”*

After their consultations and several changes the experts from the SADC countries endorsed the Regional Minimum Standards, which will now be submitted to the governments of the SADC member states at a ministerial level for consideration and approval.

Dr. Gimo, Deputy Chairman of the SADC secretariat, emphasized in his final comments that the implementation of these standards after the approval by the Ministers will be the greatest challenge in this process.

For media enquiries please contact:

Mr Andreas Zeidler

Programme Associate: Advocacy and Communications

UNODC Southern Africa

Telephone: +27 12 4320845/0820 | Mobile +27 82 414 7106 | Email andreas.zeidler@unodc.org