

UNODC launches African HIV in Prisons Partnership Network

Johannesburg, 19 November 2009. Worldwide, the high rates of HIV in prisons pose a serious threat for prison populations and in turn, the broader community. The lack of knowledge and education amongst prisoners regarding the risks of contracting and transmitting HIV, along with the absence of protective measures and proper health services in prisons, increases their risks of infection. Upon release, despite having been at high risk of exposure for HIV transmission whilst in prison, most return to the community where they may engage in pre-existing high risk activities for the transmission of HIV such as sexual behaviour of multiple concurrent partners and Injecting Drug Use (IDU), and as a result increasing the risks of HIV infection for the broader community.

Prison and public health authorities and national Governments are therefore faced with significant challenges in dealing with HIV related issues in prison settings, which demand coordinated action. Furthermore, available information on the prevalence of HIV and IDU in prison settings is vague, drawn from statistically non-representative samples from a limited number of countries. For the most part, and especially in Africa, strategies to address HIV in prisons are isolated and not well situated within national HIV action plans and strategies.

In this light, UNODC, in partnership with WHO, the World Bank and UNAIDS, and through the financial support of the Swedish/Norwegian HIV/AIDS Team for Africa, today launched the African HIV in Prisons Partnership Network (AHPPN) in Johannesburg, South Africa. This Southern and East Africa consultation held between 17 and 18 November 2009 involved representatives from prison authorities, national aids councils, health, research and academic institutions, civil society and various United Nations Agencies from 16 African countries.

The overall objective of the AHPPN is to support relevant stakeholders in their efforts to mount effective, human rights-based responses to HIV in prisons in Africa, through advocacy and facilitation of international, national and multi-sectoral cooperation and action. The Network furthermore aims to facilitate knowledge sharing and linkages between government officials and other relevant stakeholders, including civil society, to ensure a holistic approach is adopted.

Discussing the need to adopt this holistic way forward, Ms. Elizabeth Mataka, the United Nations Secretary-General Special Envoy for AIDS in Africa and Keynote Speaker at the launch noted, “we cannot work in silos...we need everyone, from Government officials, National AIDS Councils, law enforcement agencies, civil society organisations, prisoners and former prisoners, to truly reach the objectives of universal access to HIV prevention, treatment, care and support for this particular sub-population, but also with benefits for society-at-large”.

This integrated multi-sectoral approach to HIV and AIDS prevention, care, treatment and support strategies in prison settings in Africa will result in well articulated policies and programmes driven by Governments operating within the widely recognised international standards of human rights and medical ethics in their provision of health services for prisoners. The Network will also serve to ensure that HIV prevention, care, treatment and support programmes in prisons are developed and implemented on the basis of qualitative and quantitative data and evidence-based successful practices.

Supporting this need for comprehensive, data-back programmes, Ms. Mataka stated, “We need more comprehensive information about the HIV situation in prisons across Africa in part through seroprevalence studies and behavioural surveys. This information should inform the development of evidence-based comprehensive, HIV prevention, care, treatment and support services for men, women and juveniles in prisons and ex-prisoners; without discrimination. These services, it goes without saying, should be of the same quality and standard, as non-prisoners; and address linkages with the broader community.”

Focussing on areas such as HIV and AIDS, tuberculosis, mental health, drug use and prison overcrowding, and by facilitating international cooperation and sharing of experiences, the AHPPN will provide and facilitate technical support access to Member States, encouraging improved prison health services and overall prison management.

The principle outcome of the Consultation Forum is the adoption of an AHPPN Regional Declaration of Commitment on HIV and AIDS in Prisons, developed in consideration of the social, cultural and economic context of Africa to be used as the Framework for mounting effective responses to HIV and AIDS in prisons in the Region.

In order to support the Networks activities, the [AHPPN website](#) has been released to facilitate information sharing and ideas generation. One of the key advantages of the website is the ability to connect actors across the Continent and break the geographical divide whilst linking diverse people sharing a common interest. The adopted declaration will be available for download from the website from Monday 23 November 2009.

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