

Executive Director

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Dear Colleagues,

Thank you for your letter concerning my plenary speech at the recent EECAAC 2009 conference in Moscow. Such thoughtful and frank comments are the hallmarks of a robust relationship between UNAIDS and the civil society networks for harm reduction and human rights which you represent. I place tremendous value in our collaboration, as we share the same goals of promoting human rights, halting the spread of HIV, and ensuring universal access to prevention, treatment, care and support services for people affected by the AIDS epidemic. I offer this response in the context of that relationship and as an opportunity to enhance our collaboration to accelerate progress towards these goals.

I wish to clarify the purpose of my remarks at EECAAC 2009 and the position of the United Nations on these important issues. My remarks clearly emphasized the unequivocal commitment of the United Nations to the universality of human rights and to effective harm reduction programmes as essential components of the response to HIV. Indeed, I understand that this was the first time such a clear and supportive position on these issues was ever delivered in this region by the head of a UN organization. This commitment is also reflected in the UNAIDS Outcome Framework, which I introduced earlier this year after extended discussions with civil society. The Outcome Framework clearly specifies that protecting drug users from HIV through effective harm reduction approaches and removing punitive laws, policies, practices, stigma and discrimination, which impede effective HIV responses are two of UNAIDS' nine key priorities for coming years. The Outcome Framework also places special emphasis more broadly on the protection of human rights.

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It is important to make a clear distinction between “decriminalization” of drug users and “legalization of illicit drug use”. In my Moscow remarks, I expressed this distinction clearly, as many government officials in this region have expressed their concern that the provision of opioid substitution therapy would lead to the legalization of illicit drugs, a fear that is not supported by the evidence from countries with successful harm reduction programmes, but still had to be addressed. I want to underline that UNAIDS fully supports access to comprehensive harm reduction for people who inject drugs, including opioid substitution therapy. This is sound public health and consistent with our commitment to human rights.

UNAIDS is unequivocal in our call for the decriminalization of people who use drugs. I have seen first hand how the application of criminal penalties drives people who use drugs away from HIV prevention and treatment services, and also results in overcrowded prisons, where they face increased vulnerability to HIV, hepatitis, tuberculosis and drug dependence. As I said in Moscow, people who are dependent on drugs should be provided with treatment and services for dependence as a health condition. The UNAIDS Outcome Framework specifically calls for addressing not only punitive laws, but also policies and practices that impede effective responses to HIV. The UNAIDS Secretariat and UNDP are currently undertaking measures to build strong documentation of their impact. We look forward to your close involvement in these efforts to build national support and action to change harmful laws, policies, regulations and practices.

I use this opportunity to reaffirm the UNAIDS position on harm reduction – the full package of harm reduction services should be implemented in countries where HIV is transmitted through sharing of contaminated injecting equipment. This position has been endorsed by Member States at the UNAIDS Programme Coordination Board, at the Commission on Narcotic Drugs and at ECOSOC.¹ Harm reduction has to be supported by national legislation to be implemented safely and with efficacy. In Eastern Europe and Central Asia, where unsafe injecting drug use continues to be the main risk factor for HIV transmission, we need to redouble our efforts to promote and legalize the full package of harm reduction components.

Let me add a word about the Russian Federation. As the country with the largest epidemic in the region, and commanding significant political influence, the leadership of the Russian Government merits special attention and bears special responsibilities. The Russian Government has made significant progress in the AIDS response since the G8 Summit in St. Petersburg. However, much more remains to be done to address HIV transmission in Russia. As I said in Moscow, UNAIDS expects the Russian Government to translate its commitment to universal access into effective prevention services for those most at risk for HIV. In my speech, as well as in face to face discussions with Russian officials and in my remarks to the media, I emphasized that rapid changes are needed to ensure the full implementation of harm reduction services in the Russian Federation. The commitment and advocacy of civil society networks will strengthen our commitment to encourage such changes in Russia and in other countries of the region.

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¹ UNODC/WHO/UNAIDS Target Setting Guide on responses to HIV among injecting drug users.

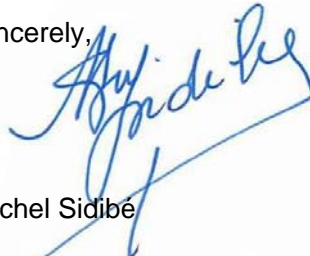
In addition to emphasizing the importance of harm reduction, I used my speech to call on the governments of the region to sustain and scale-up programmes delivered by civil society and to support the central role played by people living with HIV. Thanks to these efforts, significant progress has been made in Eastern Europe and Central Asia on all areas of prevention, including harm reduction. In close collaboration with the Global Fund and other partners, UNAIDS is committed to sustaining the key role of civil society as an essential partner in the provision of services for HIV prevention, treatment, care and support.

At the upcoming board meeting of the Global Fund in Addis Ababa, I intend to voice UNAIDS' serious concern about the need to maintain and scale-up harm reduction programmes in Russia and in other countries of the region, where they are still lack government support, or are at-risk of being scaled-back. Rest assured that UNAIDS will continue to use every opportunity to achieve effective and sustained solutions that will protect the human rights and meet the needs of those affected by HIV and drug injection in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. The upcoming milestones of the 53rd Session of the Commission on Narcotic Drugs in Vienna, the Harm Reduction 2010 Conference in Liverpool and the XVIII International AIDS Conference in Vienna present us with concrete opportunities to work together towards much needed progress.

Finally, I repeat my call for a new approach for mutual accountability to sustain and transform our response to the epidemic. I look forward to continuing to benefit from your perspective, partnership, and advocacy as we implement relevant aspects of the Outcome Framework, including clear and appropriate communication messages in the complex and critical areas of harm reduction and human rights of people who use drugs. I urge you to judge UNAIDS by our actions and our results.

You have my assurance that UNAIDS will not relent until universal access is a reality for people for all who do not benefit from it, especially people who inject drugs.

Sincerely,



Michel Sidibé

cc: UNAIDS Reference Group on HIV and Human Rights