


The road towards universal access



Scaling up access to HIV prevention, treatment, care and support

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Scaling up the AIDS response to contain the epidemic in South Eastern Europe

Regional consultation on scaling up towards universal access in South Eastern Europe (Bucharest, Romania, 8-9 March 2006)



More than 50 governments' representatives, leaders from civil society organizations, people living with HIV, including from the newly established South Eastern European Network of People living with HIV met on 8th and 9th March 2006 in Bucharest, Romania, to explore the regions obstacles and opportunities to scale up the HIV and AIDS response.

The consultation, hosted by the Romanian government, builds on the outcome of 9 country consultations that took place across the region from December 2005 to February 2006. The objectives of the national and regional consultations were to

- evaluate the national and regional AIDS response in South East Europe
- articulate the region's objectives on the 2010 horizon and
- set up an agenda for action based on the analysis of the region's specific obstacles and the proposed actions to overcome them.

The AIDS epidemic in South East Europe appears to be relatively limited but recent data show alarming evidence of increasing risky behaviours such as unprotected sex and increasing number of injecting drug users especially among young people. In addition, high mobility, unemployment,

poverty, gender inequality and the psychological scars of past conflicts fuel increased HIV transmission in the region.

All participants acknowledged the existence of a latent risk of an AIDS explosion in the region and agreed with Mr Eugen Nicolaeescu, Romanian Minister of Health, on the critical importance of deploying all possible efforts to prevent it and to maintain the current low prevalence. "Scaling up towards universal access is a not to be missed opportunity for countries in South Eastern Europe, he said, if we want to protect our people from being infected and avoid another human tragedy".

Creating more opportunities for prevention, improving access to treatment and reducing stigma and discrimination associated with HIV and AIDS were the overarching objectives discussed at the meeting.

The issue of sustainable financing was the major obstacles identified throughout the region and reiterated in Bucharest. Most participants expressed concern that the upcoming accession to the European Union for the majority of countries may affect the international funding that they receive which would in turn jeopardize the existing HIV and AIDS programmes and prevent efforts to scale up prevention, treatment, care and support.

As an answer, participants agreed that it was critical to increase the domestic budget allocations on HIV and AIDS at central and local levels. Establishing national AIDS accounts would enable monitoring and evaluation of financial flows and spending and work towards greater accountability which was also high on the agenda in Bucharest.

In parallel, the participants discussed the importance of creating a political momentum in the region in order to secure GFATM grants, World Bank soft loans and other donors investments even after accession the to the European Union and to advocate for increased European HIV and AIDS



funding in the region. This mobilization should be based on the general commitment to avoid a human tragedy in the region.

Another important difficulty derives from the low prevalence of the AIDS epidemic in the region. The limited number of people living with HIV in South East Europe does not create enough leverage for reducing the cost of medicines and other HIV related technologies. Therefore, the participants decided to adopt a model that has been successfully implemented in other parts of Europe whereby country representatives from across the region develop a unified position in order to negotiate with pharmaceutical companies in a reunion already scheduled to take place in fall 2006 with support from UNAIDS, the European AIDS Treatment Group and the South Eastern Europe Network of People Living with HIV. A delegate from Serbia said that "he was very pleased to sit together with colleagues from Kosovo, Albania, Croatia and others. I strongly believe, he added, that after this consultation, we will be able to speak with a single voice across the borders of our region".

The Bucharest participants also identified, in the following four thematic areas, a number of concrete actions needed to overcome the obstacles in the region and transform the AIDS response:

Ensure sustainable funding for AIDS response

- Increase domestic investments on HIV and AIDS at both central and local level and establish National AIDS Accounts for monitoring and evaluation of financial flows and spending.
- Strengthen budget planning capacities and ensure effective financial management by promoting cost effective interventions.
- Encourage the engagement of the private sector in HIV prevention and treatment by establishing adequate incentive systems
- Work with donors to harmonize and align funding with national priorities

Strengthen capacities of human resources and health and social systems

- Develop appropriate and specific human resources development plans based on the assessment and mapping of existing capacities and develop national guidelines and protocols for prevention, treatment, care and support based on international best practices
- Integrate HIV and AIDS prevention and care into existing health and social structures, expand HIV services for most at risks populations at community level
- Establish quality assurance systems for health and social services related to HIV and AIDS.

Ensure affordable commodities and low cost technologies

- Establish national procurement systems to ensure universal and consistent access to a treatment package (combining antiretroviral (ARV) and medication for opportunistic infections) under National AIDS Programmes

- Accelerate the application of PEP guidelines for healthcare workers in each country and promote their availability for other groups of populations
- Implement substitution therapy and encourage adherence to ARV among Injecting Drug Users (IDUs) as one of the most important regional prevention activities
- Promote and strengthen harm reduction programmes
- Ensure maximal access to condoms by providing them free of charge to groups of population most at risk including prisoners and members of uniformed services.

Address stigma and discrimination, promote human rights

- Review existing national legal frameworks in line with European and other international standards and ensure their enforcement
- Develop and implement national strategies for eliminating stigma and discrimination as part of National Strategic Plans
- Empower groups of people living with HIV and AIDS by strengthening (or establishing) collaboration with Human Rights groups
- Establish AIDS watch bodies at national level
- Ensure active involvement of people living with HIV in decision making at all levels.

A number of recommendations were also made for action at regional and global level:

- Establish a regional network for scaling up HIV prevention, treatment, care and support in South Eastern European countries.
- Mobilize additional resources and sustain international funding through the extension of GFATM grants, World Bank soft loans and other donor investments.
- Strengthen and increase utilization of Regional Knowledge Hubs
- Develop a regional initiative to enable proactive price negotiations for medical and laboratory commodities – a regional consultation between country representatives and pharmaceutical companies facilitated by UNAIDS, EATB and SEE to be organized in fall 2006.
- Promote horizontal collaboration between countries and share regional best practices with regard to prevention, treatment, care and support.
- Development of a joint regional programme to address HIV and AIDS among illegal migrant workers and trafficked human beings
- Establish an international ombudsperson mechanism at the level of European court of Human Rights

This consultation, and the national consultations it builds upon, is part of a worldwide movement aiming at identifying obstacles to scale up HIV prevention, treatment, care and support and transform the AIDS response in the world.

UNAIDS has been tasked by a United Nations General Assembly resolution to assist in facilitating this worldwide country driven, broadly inclusive movement and to analyze its outcome into an assessment report to be submitted for the consideration of the United Nations AIDS review 2006 scheduled in May 2006.