The Challenge of HIV and AIDS: UNDP’s Response to the Epidemic in China

The serious impact of the HIV/AIDS epidemic on the development of the local economy and society is increasingly felt...China’s HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment is now at a critical moment...We should be fully aware that HIV/AIDS prevention and control has great bearing on the strength of the Chinese nation and the fate of the country.

Wen Jiabao, Premier, People’s Republic of China
Policy Statement on Joint Efforts for Effective Prevention and Control of HIV/AIDS

A Critical Juncture

AIDS is one of the most significant challenges of the new millennium. Communities with serious epidemics face increasing poverty, significant reductions in life expectancy, and weakened health and educational institutions — negative effects that will be felt for generations. Despite substantial investments in AIDS prevention programs worldwide, 45 million new infections are predicted within the next eight years. In light of these alarming figures, UN Secretary General, Ban Ki-Moon, recently called on governments around the world to honor their pledge and provide "leadership at all levels to step up the work to scale up towards universal access to HIV prevention, treatment, care and support by 2010."

In China, there is a relatively low overall incidence of infection, although pockets of prevalence do exist. Infection rates are high in areas affected by unsanitary blood and blood plasma collection activities in the mid-90s and within vulnerable groups such as intravenous drug users, sex workers, and men who have sex with men. Over the past several years, the national government has reiterated its strong commitment to combat HIV and AIDS, identifying prevention and control as a priority in the 11th National Five-Year Development Plan (2006-2010) and reinforcing the importance of having an HIV and AIDS strategy to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

However, China’s policy moves come during a critical juncture as recent statistics show overall transmission rates increasing. Especially disturbing is that sexual transmission is growing disproportionately faster and affected populations are becoming more general. A number of embedded national characteristics, including a large migrant workforce, an overburdened public health sector, efforts to align national policy and local implementation, high levels of stigma and discrimination towards people living with HIV (PLHIV), and low awareness of transmission methods, are propelling this disturbing trend. As infection rates rise, so does the risk of a truly large-scale epidemic.

UNDP’s Unique Resources

An integrated response, with multi-sectoral partnerships, is crucial to preventing the HIV situation from spiraling out of control. As an integral part of the United Nations Joint Programme AIDS (2007-2010) in China, UNDP is complementing the work of other UN agencies by applying its unique resources to address specific HIV-related challenges involving governance, human rights and gender, and human development. UNDP provides China with access to global best practices in engaging local experience to promote human rights and reduce stigma, and in creating comprehensive human development projects focusing on vulnerable groups.

- Enabling Governance and Civil Society

The national government has made clear, through the adoption of recent national laws and regulations, that preventing the spread of HIV and AIDS is one of the top priorities for China. UNDP has built on its support of the drafting and adoption of these policies by working with...
the National People’s Congress on the project, Strengthen-ning an Enabling Legislative Environment to Respond to HIV and AIDS in China. This project focuses on harmonizing na-tional multi-sector HIV-related laws and regulations, on providing local officials with the leadership capacity neces-sary for effective policy implementation, and on helping to forge a supportive legal environment for HIV and AIDS. A major outcome for this project will be the training of local and provincial legislators in multiple provinces on HIV and policy implementation related issues.

UNDP also aims to facilitate closer working relationships be-tween the government and CSOs through advocacy work-shops and seminars. Extensive international experience has shown that to successfully address the AIDS epidemic, civil society organizations (CSOs) need to be at the forefront of both advocacy and response. UNDP’s efforts help CSOs build the skills necessary to successfully do their work, un-derstand their roles, and create effective strategies.

**Addressing HIV and Human Development**

HIV and AIDS is one of the greatest threats to human de-velopment. When the epidemic strikes, it takes its victims from the entire community, and the loss of their productivity and skill-sets destroys the community’s ability to care for itself and sometimes even to continue functioning. To address these threats to community well-being, UNDP has devel-oped a modular, prevention-focused project, Mitigating the Negative Impacts of HIV and AIDS on Human Development. The first module targets mobile and migrant populations in hopes of reducing their vulnerability to HIV. It works with key multi-sector stakeholders and local governments to de-velop targeted HIV prevention interventions in selected areas along China’s northern border. Future modules will address other vulnerable populations to reduce the impacts of HIV on human development in these communities.

UNDP has also supported projects that provide households affected by AIDS with the necessary capital and skills to re-main self-reliant. One example was in Shanxi province, where UNDP, working with National Center for STD/AIDS (NCAIDS), enabled PLHIVs not only regain confidence and respect, but come to depend less on state provided social services through the Community Based Care, Support, and Poverty Reduction in Shanxi project.

**Reducing Stigma, Promoting Participation**

People living with HIV have traditionally suffered from dis-crimination and stigma due to the general public’s ignorance about HIV and the low visibility of PLHIVs. To combat this, UNDP promotes educational and public awareness activities, while also engaging the arts and en-tertainment community for support. The “We Are Friends” Anti-Stigma Campaign, undertaken by a unique multi-sector partnership of UN agencies, government agencies, NGOs, and the private sector, has distributed over 200,000 anti-stigma posters featuring NBA star Yao Ming and stage and screen star Pu Cunxin with youth affected by HIV to schools, clinics, and other public places across the nation.

At the same time, UNDP recognizes the importance of PLHIVs being visible and involved in their communities. Implemented by Marie Stopes International China and supported by UNDP and UNAIDS, the Positive Talks project seeks to train people living with HIV to become public speakers, effective advocates, and educators about issues related to HIV and AIDS. The project has already con ducted over 200 trainings and positive talks across the country. UNDP is committed to continuing to find innova-tive ways to encourage PLHIV contributions to reducing discrimination and advocating for relevant policies.

**Coming Together**

The global community has learned many lessons about how to prevent and treat HIV and mitigate the worst social and economic impacts for individuals, families, and communities. As the Chinese government continues to reiterate its commitment to combating HIV and AIDS and preventing an epidemic from taking hold, it is important to engage all stakeholders and find a common path.

UNDP, working with the UN System, the Chinese government, civil society, the private sector, and people living with HIV, aims to link international best practices to community expertise in order to help create innovative and effective solutions for local situations. Successfully meeting the challenge of HIV in China is necessary not just to help avoid a widespread epidemic, but to also ensure that people living with HIV and AIDS have the same opportunities as those who are not to build better lives for themselves and their families.

UNDP fosters human development to empower women and men to build better lives in China. As the UN’s development network, UNDP draws on a world of experience to assist China in developing its own solutions to the country’s development challenges. Through partnerships and innovation, UNDP works to achieve the Millennium Development Goals and an equitable Xiao Kang society by reducing poverty, strengthening the rule of law, promoting environmental sustainability, and fighting HIV/AIDS.

To contribute to this initiative, or to find out more about UNDP China’s work on HIV/AIDS, please visit our website at [www.undp.org.cn/hivaids](http://www.undp.org.cn/hivaids) or contact Mr. Edmund Settle, Programme Manager, HIV/AIDS, at (86-10) 8532 0775 or edmund.settle@undp.org.