

United in Viet Nam's fight against HIV/AIDS

No government alone has the capacity to respond to the challenges HIV/AIDS poses. In Viet Nam, a wide Community of Concerned Partners—ranging from multilateral and bilateral donors to foundations to international and local NGOs—actively supports Viet Nam and its people in the fight against HIV/AIDS.

During a special 2001 session, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGASS) unanimously adopted the Declaration of Commitment on HIV/AIDS. This UNGASS Declaration provides a framework for effective global and local responses to HIV/AIDS.

The government of Viet Nam is committed to the Declaration's implementation and is leading a national response to HIV/AIDS. The Community of Concerned Partners want to ensure that no gaps emerge between Viet Nam's fight against HIV/AIDS and the devastating socio-economic consequences of the epidemic and the toll it takes on human welfare. Therefore, this Community urges the leaders of Viet Nam, at all levels, to take decisive action relative to the following priority concerns.

Community of Concerned Partners

Actions Necessary to Overcome HIV/AIDS in Viet Nam

1. Provide strong, high-profile leadership
2. Eliminate the confusion between HIV/AIDS and social evils
3. Recognize that HIV/AIDS will affect the development of the nation
4. Engage all society in the fight against HIV/AIDS
5. Confront the difficult issues surrounding injecting drug users and commercial sex workers
6. Recognize and deal with the impact HIV/AIDS has on women
7. Support and involve people living with HIV/AIDS
8. Coordinate efforts effectively
9. Foster a national dialogue
10. Avoid complacency

The battle against this epidemic requires strong, high-profile leadership

International experience demonstrates that the most important factor for success in the struggle against HIV/AIDS is the commitment and personal involvement of a nation's leaders. The exercise of strong leadership from the highest political levels of Viet Nam is fundamental to prevent an HIV/AIDS pandemic from occurring in the country.

Advocates and leaders at both national and local levels must recognize HIV/AIDS as a threat to the nation's development agenda. Successful efforts against HIV/AIDS in other countries, however, demonstrate that political leadership requires visible personal commitment and a willingness to take concrete actions and support innovative approaches.

Leaders must set the example for the wider societal response to HIV/AIDS. They can do this best by acting as champions of the HIV issue. Leaders must:

- Speak out with confidence on issues like safer sex and risk behaviours
- Spearhead efforts to increase knowledge and awareness of HIV/AIDS
- Take every opportunity to promote behavioural change, especially among youth
- Reach out to and embrace those infected or affected by HIV/AIDS

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Eliminate the confusion between HIV/AIDS and social evils

HIV is a virus, not an evil. We need to separate the issue of social evils from HIV transmission. HIV can be transmitted to:

- Anyone who engages in unprotected sex with an infected person
- Anyone who uses shared injecting equipment that contains the virus
- A foetus when carried by an infected pregnant woman
- To a baby when breastfed by an infected mother

As long as campaigns, communication message and interventions on HIV/AIDS focus on individuals or groups practising what are considered social evils, the majority of the Vietnamese population will not recognise that their own behaviour or that of their sexual partners makes them vulnerable as well.

This is especially true with the youth of Viet Nam. The likely progression of HIV/AIDS transmission in Viet Nam will be among its young people, for the global majority of new HIV infections falls among those aged 18-26. Increasingly, Viet Nam's adolescents and youth will be infected through sexual activity and by sharing injecting equipment without necessarily associating with marginalized groups.

The social evils approach can also lead to stigmatisation, pushing already vulnerable populations further "underground", preventing them from seeking and receiving appropriate treatment, care, and support. Treating HIV/AIDS as a social evil will not result in its reduction.

Recognize HIV/AIDS as a development crisis, with devastating human consequences

HIV/AIDS can quickly reverse the considerable progress made in Viet Nam to foster economic growth and reduce poverty. Therefore, the reduction of HIV transmission must be a key development target. Poverty and HIV/AIDS are closely linked, for poverty is both a cause and a consequence of HIV infection. Unless the link between HIV/AIDS and development is articulated and addressed, the epidemic will seriously erode human and social capital, severely undermining prospects for continued private and public sector investment and economic growth in Viet Nam.

Action is required to strengthen HIV prevention, treatment, and mitigation while simultaneously recognizing the role that poverty reduction efforts have in the fight against HIV/AIDS. Specific steps should be taken to further mainstream HIV/AIDS interventions into national and local development plans, including Viet Nam's own socio-economic plans and the Comprehensive Poverty Reduction and Growth Strategy (CPRGS) as well as in national and provincial/local budgetary allocations.

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Engage all society in the fight against HIV/AIDS

Global experience confirms that HIV/AIDS is best addressed through a multi-sectoral approach. HIV/AIDS is an issue that involves all aspects of human life. All stakeholders—including adolescents, adults, mass organisations, civil society, and the business sector—must become involved and help translate this multi-sectoral approach into a wide range of specific HIV/AIDS interventions.

Greater support is needed to develop interventions through education and empowering young people to make informed, appropriate choices. Emphasis should be put on:

- Providing anonymous testing/counselling and care services
- Promoting easy access to condoms, including sale in non-pharmacy outlets
- Creating attractive and relevant IEC materials
- Maintaining a safe blood supply and standard precautionary practices

Confront the difficult issues surrounding Injecting Drug Users and commercial sex workers

Injecting drug users, commercial sex workers and their sexual partners have a high vulnerability of contracting HIV/AIDS. There needs to be a greater overall understanding of drug addiction, drug use and of ways to promote the safe practices building on the existing positive behaviours. Policy support and commitment is needed to scale-up successful methods/initiatives for implementing effective detoxification, drug substitution, and harm reduction programs, including needle and syringe distribution/exchange, condom promotion and social marketing, peer education, and community-based support groups, in the close cooperation with job creation and poverty reduction programmes.

Recognize and deal with the impact HIV/AIDS has on women

Greater attention must be paid to the fact that HIV infection of Vietnamese women is on the rise. Women are disproportionately vulnerable to sexual transmission of HIV; men are more likely to transmit the virus to women than vice versa. Existing social and economic inequalities as well as prevailing gender power relations make it difficult for women to protect themselves from sexual transmission of HIV. The only widely available method for preventing sexual transmission of HIV is the male condom, a method that requires men's willingness and consent. Far too many men are reluctant to use condoms. Most women, especially those who are economically dependent on their male partners, have little—if any—power to enforce condom use by their partners.

As the family caregivers, women provide most of the care and support for those infected and affected by HIV/AIDS. Caring for infected children and the psychological damage arising from infection by a loved one add enormous burdens to the women's traditional tasks of rearing children, producing food, and earning other incomes for living. The pressures would become really powerful for the HIV infected women. They have to carry these burdens regardless of their own situation and despite their own extensive needs for access to new therapies, information, and support for dealing with discrimination and prejudice.

Support and involve people living with HIV/AIDS

Recognize, respect, and promote the rights of people living with HIV/AIDS. Actively involve them in the effort to prevent the further spread of HIV. All people living in Viet Nam with HIV/AIDS need to be able to realize and enjoy the rights to live with dignity and peace.

Sensitive and confidential care and treatment for these individuals should be fundamental, just as it is to those suffering from other life threatening diseases. Discrimination against people living with HIV/AIDS is already prohibited in Viet Nam and those who discriminate should be punished.

Vietnamese citizens have a responsibility to help others infected or affected by HIV/AIDS to enjoy their rights. People living with HIV/AIDS should play a meaningful role in the design, implementation, and evaluation of HIV/AIDS prevention and care in Viet Nam. This requires that mechanisms be developed to allow the voices of people living with HIV/AIDS, including children and youth, to be heard.

Develop effective coordination mechanisms led by Government

Enormous international good will and financial support exist in Viet Nam for the efforts to contain HIV/AIDS and manage its effects. As highlighted in a recent evaluation of the past National AIDS programme, the presence of two governmental organizations with responsibility for HIV/AIDS within the Ministry of Health leads to confusion and lack of coordination. To some extent, there is a fragmentation of understanding, focus, and effort. Greater clarity in the present HIV/AIDS governmental organizational structure is needed to ensure programme effectiveness.

The battle against HIV/AIDS must be coordinated within a national strategic framework that is coherent and fosters collaboration. Government led co-ordination among Government agencies, donors, and NGOs is also required to assess and scale up successful interventions, monitor the epidemic, and ensure widespread dissemination of best practices.

Foster a national dialogue on HIV/AIDS

Foster a national dialogue on HIV/AIDS. Speedy action should be taken to develop a national HIV/AIDS communication strategy. To facilitate a policy and legislative framework that supports effective HIV/AIDS interventions, there is an compelling need to generate a common understanding of the root causes of the epidemic and rights-related issues.

To ensure that this common understanding is broadly shared, an effort is urgently needed to develop an appropriate communication strategy that appreciates and capitalises on societal mores, ideologies, and the tradition of rights and responsibilities of Viet Nam. The active involvement of all mass media is vital to the success of a truly national effort to reduce the spread of HIV/AIDS and to mitigate its consequences.

Avoid complacency

Though there is no room for complacency, Viet Nam can rise to the challenge of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Few other nations have faced the enormous challenges confronted by Viet Nam in the past century. Even fewer have achieved such outstanding success. There is no reason to believe Viet Nam can be any less successful in dealing with HIV/AIDS, if timely, concerted and appropriate actions are taken to avert the emerging crisis.

However, this is not the time for complacency. An apparent slowing in the increase or reduction in incidence during one year can be followed by a surge in new infections the next.

Leadership and concerted, coordinated action are necessary if Viet Nam is to prevail against HIV/AIDS.