



Date: 19 November 2020

Winnie Byanyima
Executive Director
Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS)
Geneva, Switzerland

URGENT CALL FROM MYANMAR TO: CONTINUE _____, START _____, STOP _____ for the next UNAIDS strategy beyond 2021

Dear Ms. Byanyima,

We, the community networks in the Asia Pacific, through APCOM, extend our sincere congratulations for your appointment as UNAIDS' Executive Director. We trust that your extensive experience and expertise will continue to shape and scale up the response to HIV in Asia and the Pacific region. We also believe that your ongoing efforts will lead build effective advocacy strategies to end the HIV/AIDS epidemic by 2030.

As per the UNAIDS 2019 report – in 2018, more than half of all new infections were among key populations – gay men and other men who have sex with men, transgender people, sex workers, prisoners, and their partners.

Key populations make up a small proportion of the general population, but they are at extremely high risk of HIV infection. Available data suggest that the risk of HIV acquisition among gay men and other men who have sex with men was 22 times higher in 2018 than it was among all adult men. Similarly, the risk of acquiring HIV for people who inject drugs was 22 times higher than for people who do not inject drugs, 21 times higher for sex workers than adults aged 15–49 years, and 12 times higher for transgender people than adults aged 15–49 years. These sets of information pointing to the severity of the problems in addressing HIV and AIDS in different countries. There is an urgent requirement of big investment or significant support in the region to end the HIV epidemic amongst the key populations.

Since there is a growing trend of the HIV/AIDS epidemic amongst the region's key population, there is an urgent and ongoing focus needed to end the HIV/AIDS epidemic by 2030. We strongly urge that communities' voices are heard, and their strategic inputs should be considered to be included in the UNAIDS strategy.

Myanmar country context

HIV epidemic situation

Health system in Myanmar remains poorly resourced and under-equipped to achieve the UNAIDS “90–90–90” target or the ambitious Sustainable Development Goal of ending the AIDS epidemic by 2030. It’s frequently challenging for Myanmar health services to reach key populations and ensure that they are receiving optimal care. Although sustained and focused efforts to reach key populations have led to major reductions in HIV infections between 2010 and 2017, Myanmar continues to display a high incidence of new HIV infections. Programming for PrEP, U=U followed by HIV self-testing were recently started in the country, only led by INGO. These interventions should be scaled up, preferably by involving community-led activities for demand creation.

Legal environment

Regarding legal and human rights issues affecting the key populations and their community, there have been many cases reported related to human rights violations and violence among key populations. We need to put more efforts on promoting an enabling environment by addressing the legal barriers to accessing prevention, treatment and care (e.g. by rapidly changing punitive and discriminatory laws). Community networks/organizations need to reconsider for specific advocacy strategy with collective voice to improve on community engagement in decision making process and meaningful participation in the country.

COVID-19 impact on key population

Many community organizations have changed the way of their work in the new normal era. Community needs to adapt with the use of technology in terms of communication and delivering HIV prevention services. Community also needed technical inputs on how to reprogramming their activities during restricted movements. As there is scarce opportunity for rapid response grants, only few organizations in Myanmar could receive funding support during COVID-19. As most of the proposals set to specific selection criteria and requirements (e.g. English language, not allowed for new partners, etc.), communities are facing challenges to apply the call for proposal.

Myanmar Youth Stars proposing the below points to be included the UNAIDS strategy document.

Continue:

- Need continuous support from UN agencies, INGOs and government in terms of technical guidance, capacity strengthening and funding support in order to put in place the role of community-led initiatives and to be ready for the next GF round in Myanmar.

Start:

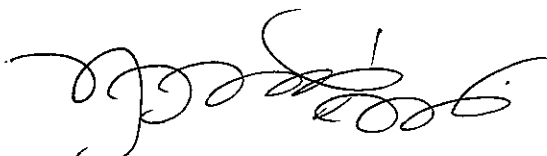
- Expand more digital health services and other innovative approaches to provide services for key populations and avoid disruption to HIV-related and health services (e.g. HIV self-testing, multi month dispensing for ART, methadone, combination prevention for HIV).
- Reach young key population and partners of key populations and other hidden populations those who are at high risk to contracting HIV.
- Integrate one stop service for key populations including addressing sexual and reproductive health, hormonal therapy, mental health, violence and other services linkages.

- Start support meaningful representation from community networks in high level meeting by providing technical support on facilitating/collecting the information on the community needs/issues, and also reducing language barriers (re. using medical/technical terms and many meetings discussion are in English).

Stop:

- Stop the level of participation (designing and planning, decision making, implementation) from UNAIDS, INGO, Government in order to promote localization (community empowerment).
- Stop investing high amount on activities led by UNAIDS, INGO, Government (e.g involved as project staffs for supporting implementation in prevention and treatment programme, awareness raising via social media channels). Instead, delegate those activities to community organizations, with provided technical guidance by UNAIDS.

Your sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Midnight Poonkasetwattana".

Midnight Poonkasetwattana

Executive Director

APCOM

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Dr. Min Thet Phyto San".

Dr. Min Thet Phyto San

Network and Program Coordinator

Myanmar Youth Stars Network - Myanmar





About APCOM

APCOM is a Regional organization based in Bangkok, Thailand. It represents and works with a network of individuals and community-based organizations across 35 countries in Asia and the Pacific. It primarily focuses to improve the health and rights of gay men, other men who have sex with men, and SOGIESC people across Asia and the Pacific region. It also focuses on improving relevant human and legal rights across the region as discrimination, stigma, criminalization, and exclusion impact on the health outcomes of the communities we serve.

APCOM's current strategic framework revolves around three themes;

1. HIV is not over – Strengthening the HIV response for gay men and other men who have sex with me.
2. Our Rights – Protecting gay men, other men who have sex with men, and SOGIESC people.
3. Our Strength – Stronger interlinked communities and broader partner networks

Since APCOM's establishment, it has been providing technical assistance support and building the capacity of MSM and transgender communities and country partner organizations for effective HIV response at the country level.

With the funding support from several projects, including; JumpStart, Multi-Country South Asia Global Fund HIV Programme (MSA), Sustainability of HIV Services for Key Population in Asia (SKPA), APCOM has been building the capacity of the communities and community networks to improve their rights, health and well-being in the region.

About Myanmar Youth Stars

Myanmar Youth Stars is a registered, national network working with and for the young key affected populations of HIV including men who have sex with men (MSM), sex workers, drug users and people living with HIV between the age of 15 and 30. MYS is currently closely working with more than 1,200 young key population members at 18 townships across the country in terms of: 1. Advocating the rights of young key populations related with HIV and Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH); 2. Networking; 3. Capacity building since later 2012 in Myanmar.

The vision of the network is "all youth who belong to four key affected populations are healthy, capable, and equal in dignity and rights in Myanmar society". The mission of the organization is to 1. Ensure everyone from four key affected populations has an equal right regarding HIV/AIDS and Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH); 2. Enhance the capacity of youth through networking, coordination and advocacy.