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UN officials laud vital role of civil society in tackling HIV/AIDS epidemic



8 April 2011 – As representatives of civil society and the private sector met with governments today to discuss how to advance the response to HIV/AIDS ahead of a high-level meeting in June, United Nations officials lauded the vital role played by non-governmental actors in tackling the epidemic.

“The engagement of civil society and the private sector is indispensable in holding governments accountable, in ensuring that the AIDS response respects human rights, and in advocating for the creation of legal and social environments that protect people from infection and support social justice,” General Assembly President Joseph Deiss said at the start of the civil society hearing held at UN Headquarters.

Today’s meeting will inform discussions at the High-Level Meeting on AIDS, which will be convened by the General Assembly from 8 to 10 June in New York. The participants include people living with HIV as well as those representing segments of the population most affected by the epidemic.

Mr. Deiss emphasized that the response to AIDS must include – at all levels – people living with, and affected by, HIV. “Their perspective and experience are unique and have provided a wellspring of insight and breakthroughs,” he said, noting in particular that civil society’s involvement in today’s hearing should help boost effort to overcome stigma and discrimination.

Also [speaking](#) at the hearing, [Secretary-General](#) Ban Ki-moon thanked civil society for its energy and activism, which has contributed to preventing the spread of HIV, helping millions of people access treatment and pushing for a cure.

“Even though you were not in government, you knew all governments had a responsibility to respond to this epidemic with compassion and action,” he said.

In a report launched last month in preparation for the June meeting, Mr. Ban urged world leaders to take bold decisions to tackle the AIDS epidemic, warning that recent gains, while laudable, are fragile.

“My report does more than just take stock,” he stated. “It is a cry for action. This year is a moment of truth in the global AIDS response.”

He noted that while there have been extraordinary gains in recent years, funding has flatlined and HIV continues to spread. His report sets out a number of specific goals, including halving the sexual transmission of HIV, providing treatment for 13 million people, stopping all mother-to-child transmission, and ending stigma and discrimination.

While governments are working to address these issues, constructive collaboration on the part of civil society can boost their efforts, he pointed out.

“That is why I need you,” said the Secretary-General, who also pledged to take action and continue to personally urge government officials to advance the goals of no new infections, no stigma or discrimination, and no AIDS-related deaths.

Michel Sidibé, Executive Director of the Joint UN Programme on HIV/AIDS ([UNAIDS](#)), and Luiz Loures, the Director of UNAIDS Executive Office, also participated in today’s hearing.

Civil society has played a “pivotal” role in the response to AIDS, Dr. Loures told a news conference held on the sidelines of the event. In addition, the hearing is taking place at a “very special moment,” given that 2011 marks 30 years of the epidemic. There have been significant changes in that time, he said.

“We have much more progress, there is no question,” he said, noting, among other elements, that there are about six million people receiving treatment for AIDS today as compared to less than 200,000 at the time of the last General Assembly special session on the issue in 2001.

But challenges remain, he added, citing issues such as ensuring the rights of men who have sex with men, injecting drug users, sex workers, migrants and other vulnerable groups.

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