



Families can be protective force against HIV, says senior UN official



28 January 2010 – HIV and AIDS place greater burdens on families, who can sometimes be torn apart by the epidemic, but they are also a major force in prevention education as well as care and support, according to the head of the United Nations agency dealing with the issue.

“Family support can improve adherence to treatment, provide sustaining care and offer the first line of defence against stigma and isolation. And in the largest sense, strong families contribute

to community – and by extension national – stability,” Michel Sidibé, Executive Director of the Joint UN Programme on HIV/AIDS ([UNAIDS](#)), said yesterday in his keynote address to a colloquium in Doha, Qatar, where scholars gathered to discuss issues affecting the family.

Mr. Sidibé noted that communities with higher burdens struggle to shield their children from infection and to care for those who have lost parents to the disease. “Yes, families can be, and are, torn apart by AIDS,” he [stated](#).

“But let’s look at this another way: Families can also be highly protective, inoculating members against the worst outcomes of AIDS. They offer a dependable means of prevention education and the clout to keep children in school, on track and out of risk,” he added.

He highlighted recent findings from the two-year research project of the Joint Learning Initiative on Children and HIV/AIDS, which showed that families take on approximately 90 per cent of the financial cost of caring for infected and affected children. Many of these families are already living in extreme poverty, yet few receive any support from sources outside their communities.

“Maintaining and strengthening families is not very expensive,” said Mr. Sidibé. “Any developing country, no matter how poor, can afford a social protection package for children affected by HIV and AIDS and extreme poverty.”

The International Labour Organization (ILO), he said, estimates that for low-income African countries, such a package could cost less than 4.5 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP), and could include a small universal old-age pension, universal primary education, free primary health care, and a child benefit of 25 cents per day.

The UNAIDS chief cited as another key concern the freedom of movement for people living with HIV, particularly migrant workers and their families.

According to the agency, Qatar – like many others in the Middle East and North African region – imposes restriction on entry, stay and residence based on HIV status.

Such restrictions are widely considered discriminatory and serve no public health benefit, it noted.

UNAIDS also pointed out that the HIV epidemic is steadily growing in the Middle East and North Africa. In 2008 there were an estimated 310,000 people living with HIV, up from 200,000 in 2001. In that same year, approximately 35,000 people became newly infected with HIV in the region.

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