

Summary Report
Briefing Session on Youth and HIV/AIDS
March 25, 2011
UN Headquarters

The Programme on Youth of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations held a Briefing Session on Youth and HIV/AIDS on 25 March 2011 in UN Headquarters, New York. The lunch time Briefing forms part of a series of 12 briefings, planned in the context of the International Year of Youth (2010-2011). The UN Programme on Youth organized this Session to focus the spotlight on the AIDS epidemic which poses one of the most formidable challenges to the world at large, and to young people in particular. In 2008, young people accounted for 40 per cent of all new HIV infections in people aged 15 years and older.

The Briefing Session was open to member states, UN staff, and civil society NGOs with ECOSOC status.

Moderated by Ms. Ebony Johnson, the briefing featured the following panelists:

- Mr. Pierre Robert, Adolescent and Health Specialist, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
- Ms. Mary Otieno, Technical Advisor, United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)
- Mr. Jean Claude Dusingize, former volunteer, Global Youth Coalition on HIV/AIDS
- Mr. Allen Frimpong, Youth RISE

Ebony Johnson introduced the panelists by providing their brief bio on each in terms of their work on HIV and youth related issues. Taking a question and answer format, the panelists were asked two rounds of questions, with audience participants also given the opportunity to pose their own questions.

The moderator opened the discussion by saying that young people are the key in reducing the spread of HIV. The ensuing discussion provided an opportunity to reflect on the specific challenges young people with HIV face, and exchange ideas on the type of HIV/AIDS programs required to reach young people with HIV, and curtail the spread of the disease.

The first speaker, Jean-Claude Dusingize, Global Youth Coalition on HIV/AIDS, explained that in the Sub-Saharan Africa region, young people with HIV are often stigmatized and marginalized from their communities. They are unable to find work and excluded from decision-making. Moreover, due to the high rates of poverty in their communities, parents are unable to support these young people. As a result of this broad marginalization, young people become psychologically affected often losing hope. In order to reach out to them, more specialized and targeted services that cater to their needs are required. Jean-Claude also highlighted that, women

in conflict situations who are raped are especially at risk of becoming infected with HIV. Men who have sex with men and young drug users are other high-risk and vulnerable groups.

Mary Otieno, UNFPA, reported on the progress being made in halting the spread of HIV and the work of UNFPA. According to an UNAIDS Study 2010, in the last ten years, HIV prevalence has fallen in fifteen of the fastest growing countries in the world. In addition, today 88 per cent of countries use special strategies to reach young people and educate them about HIV. However, in many parts of the world, access to services that aim at preventing the spread of the infection, such as access to condoms, are either not accessible or available to young people.

Allen Frimpong, Youth Rise, made the linkages between HIV/AIDS and broader access to healthcare for young people. He explained that young people lack awareness not only on HIV/AIDS, but in general, about their health. In many cases, young people are also not aware of their rights which hinder them from demanding and accessing health care and related services. Until there is an effort to inform young people about this disease, there will be stigma and fear surrounding HIV/AIDS, and youth will not be empowered to deal with the consequences of living with it, or preventing its transmission

Pierre Robert, UNICEF opened his presentation by saying that while there is a lot of variation in the nature and spread of HIV, it predominantly is affecting those living in Africa and women. Elaborating on the female nature of the disease, Pierre explained that there are two modes of transmission of the HIV virus, vertical and horizontal. Vertical transmission occurs when the virus is spread from a HIV positive mother to her child, and horizontal transmission occurs through sexual intercourse, sharing of needles, etc. At present, a lot of young adolescents who are infected with HIV, were transmitted the disease as unborn children through their mothers. These mothers themselves were exposed to the virus in high-risk situations such as rape, sex work, trafficking etc. In terms of programming, HIV/ AIDS programming must provide psychological assistance to patients, foster a supportive environment in the community that can dispel the stigma around the virus, and ensure free and easy access to information and services to patients.

In the Question and Answer segment of the briefing session, the issue of services catering to young people with both HIV and disabilities was raised, the role of life skills education in HIV/AIDS prevention, the need for programmes that deal with HIV patients in a holistic manner by addressing their need for education, livelihood, and housing which can foster a sense of hope among them. The inclusion of voices and experiences of young people affected by HIV in policy-making; and the importance of peer-to-peer programmes on HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention was also discussed.