

Tackling HIV/AIDS: Ireland's migrant communities should not be left out

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(By Yvon Luky)

WORLD AIDS DAY was commemorated, as it is every year, on December 1st, 2019. The theme for this year is '**Communities Make the Difference**'. We would like to take the opportunity of this commemoration to highlight how recent developments are changing the face of the AIDS epidemic and how migrant communities can actively play a role in the fight against AIDS.

The Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) attacks the immune system of the body. If not treated, HIV could develop into AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome), a stage where the virus has severely damaged the immune cells that help the body fight off infections, making a person more vulnerable to other infections and diseases.

HIV/AIDS epidemic significantly evolved

-Recent progress on HIV treatment has opened the door to a promising future:

-In Ireland, antiretroviral therapy is available for free

-Community-based testing is available for free. This rapid HIV test is voluntary and procedures are simple (however, any positive result must be confirmed by a hospital laboratory).

-New infections rate is slowing down

-New HIV infections and the occurrence of AIDS are preventable

-Effective treatment is able to suppress the virus, making it undetectable

- Taking a HIV test is about you, about your own good; it is also about being responsible towards the health and wellbeing of others, about contributing to end of AIDS in your community, in your country, in the world... It is a noble decision!

Community participation is a strategy that works

Ending the AIDS epidemic is achievable if efforts are inclusive, and all sub-groups in the society are reached out. It is estimated that, in countries of the EU/EEA area, 1 in 5 people doesn't know their HIV status. This means that there are people who are living with HIV but unaware that they have the virus; therefore, they may unknowingly pass the virus to their sexual partners.

To tackle HIV/AIDS, mainstream strategies may not work for migrant communities for diverse reasons, including:

-HIV/AIDS is a sensitive issue. Migrants are considered as vulnerable to the risk of HIV, due to a combination of factors such as lack of integration, information gap on the issue, cultural and language barriers, lack of dedicated culturally sensitive services, marginalisation, stigmatisation etc. Because of the pattern of their health-seeking behaviour, a proportion of migrants are among those presenting late for diagnosis (up to years after being infected).

There is a need of a customised approach for migrants. Peer-led initiatives using resources within migrant communities may be an efficient way of ensuring that all the layers within these communities are targeted and reached with key messages that are conveyed through appropriate language, cultural and social codes that make them acceptable. In this process, sensitive

-Undetectable equals untransmittable (**U = U**). People under treatment with undetectable virus cannot transmit the virus through the sexual route. Presently, antiretroviral therapy does not cure HIV, it doesn't eliminate the virus, but it keeps it under control by stopping the virus from reproducing in your body.

As a result, many people infected with HIV can now live a healthier life, with life expectancy comparable to that of people who do not have HIV.

These developments have led to considering as achievable the end of the AIDS epidemic.

The United Nations, through the Sustainable Development Goals, have set the goal of ending AIDS by 2030. To be on track, the 90-90-90 target was defined: by 2020, 90% of all living with HIV are diagnosed; 90% of all who are diagnosed are on treatment (ART); 90% of all who are on treatment (ART) are virally suppressed. This means that by the end of 2020, 73% of all people living with HIV should be virally suppressed. To achieve the goal of ending AIDS, all people living with HIV should first be identified so that they could access treatment. So, testing for HIV is crucial.

Why should you consider HIV test?

- Testing is the sole entry to treatment; early treatment gives better chances of healthy life
- Testing is part of the HIV prevention strategies
- Getting tested and taking your HIV treatment properly are efficient measures to prevent the spread of the virus.
- If you know your HIV status, you could take the necessary steps to preserve your own health and the health of your loved ones:

-If you are HIV negative, you could take steps to preserve your status by taking precautionary measure against potential risk of HIV infection.

-If you are positive, you could start the treatment that will give you better chances of living a healthy life while preventing the transmission of the virus to your sexual partners. Regularly taking your medication as instructed by your doctor is therefore good for your own health, but also a protection for your loved ones: **Think about it!**

interaction is paramount, and real communication is needed, not mere information!

For the UNAIDS, this World AIDS Days 'is an important opportunity to recognize the essential role that communities have played and continue to play in the AIDS response at the international, national and local levels.

- Migrants should actively be involved in the fight against HIV/AIDS. The fifth goal of the HSE Intercultural Health Strategy (2018-2023) is to strengthen partnership working to enhance intercultural health by actively promoting participation of service users from minority ethnic groups in the design, planning, delivery and evaluation of services.

This goal should translate into concrete actions: policy makers, service providers need to go beyond migrant symbolic figuration; migrants really need to be involved in all the stages of the fight against HIV in their communities.

- Community leaders are a powerful channel for the dissemination of positive messages. They can also help debug misconceptions and myths about HIV/AIDS.
- Church leaders and leaders of other faith groups have a great influence on their members. They should be approached and motivated to weigh in the fight against HIV/AIDS. It is an elaborated process, but it pays off at the end.
- If purposely empowered, migrants can themselves make the difference in tackling HIV/AIDS in their communities. They can play a key role both individually and collectively. They could consider actions which include:

-**Talk about HIV/AIDS** with their peers; reject the **stigmatisation** of people living with HIV

-Talk about the '**Test-Treat-Prevent**' strategy that helps stop the spread of HIV

-**Take a HIV test** and encourage their people to do the same

In closing, ending AIDS is everyone's business; migrants shouldn't be left out that process. If empowered and involved, they can be key actors in stopping the spread of HIV infection and ultimately contribute to efforts aiming at living in a world without AIDS.