In 2014, the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS played a central role in halting a wave of human rights violations against sex workers in Tajikistan. A renewed crackdown in 2016 means UNAIDS’ leadership and support to civil society is more important than ever.
HIV in Tajikistan: a heavy burden on key populations

Sustained and rebounding AIDS epidemics in many contexts and regions such as Eastern Europe and central Asia are fuelled by punitive laws, policies and practices. In Tajikistan, while neither sex work nor same-sex sexual relations are criminalized, police harassment, unlawful detention, discrimination and other violations of key populations’ human rights keep people from accessing effective HIV-related services. Women who sell sex are particularly vulnerable to police practices that can include harassment and abuse, extortion of money and demand for sexual services. Political targeting also threatens the operation of nongovernmental organizations focused on providing HIV-related services to key populations.

The HIV epidemic in Tajikistan disproportionately affects key populations. An estimated 3.5% of sex workers and 2.7% of men who have sex with men in Tajikistan are living with HIV—compared to 0.4% of the general population. People who inject drugs face the greatest risk of infection, with more than 13% living with HIV. Access to HIV treatment in Tajikistan is also far below the global average, with just one out of five people living with HIV on treatment in 2015.

Tajikistan has recently adopted a set of ambitious targets to end the AIDS epidemic by 2030. Yet these targets will remain out of reach if the populations most affected by the epidemic are prevented from accessing critical HIV services.

As guardians of public safety, police should be trusted to respect human dignity and uphold the human rights of all people. Yet, all around the world, police too often evoke fear of violence and repression—a distant cry from their civic and social purpose. Key populations—including gay men and other men who have sex with men, people who inject drugs, and sex workers and their clients—should be supported by police as human beings with the same rights as all others.

The Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) unites the contributions of 11 UN agencies. Through its political advocacy, convening power, knowledge generation, policy guidance and technical leadership, UNAIDS seeks to empower government and civil society partners in Tajikistan to build a human rights-based AIDS response, particularly in light of recent surges in police targeting of key populations.

“Without any warning, huge raids at sex work sites were carried out, all at the same time. Within three or four days, more than 500 people had been detained, without any sort of protocol. There were grave human rights abuses. Forty people were placed in a single room. Blood was taken by force to test for HIV. As civil society, we completely lost access to our clients—half because they were detained and the other half because they’d gone underground as a result of the detentions.”

Asiya (Name Changed), Civil Society Representative in Tajikistan
Diverse coalition of human rights defenders brings change and progress

In a show of force against what were deemed "moral crimes" by the government, more than 500 alleged sex workers as well as their clients and gay men were arrested in June 2014 in Dushanbe, Tajikistan’s capital. Civil society organizations representing sex workers pressed top officials for grounds for such detention and information on detainees. When requests went unanswered, these organizations turned to UNAIDS for information and support.

In response, the UNAIDS Country Office convened the UN Joint Team on HIV/AIDS and a range of human rights organizations. Together these organizations articulated a joint statement condemning the crackdown on key populations as a violation of international human rights principles. The statement urged the Tajik Government to consider the health and justice implications of the raids, as well as potential diplomatic consequences. Following this meeting, the UN Joint Team advocated with government officials at the highest levels on behalf of civil society and the detained sex workers.

With significant support from the UN Resident Coordinator’s Office (UN RCO) and with UNAIDS’ leadership and technical assistance, a crisis response team was established to coordinate joint efforts. The team was composed of the UN RCO, UN Joint Team representatives, and international and local organizations. The team created a mechanism of information sharing to assess the situation, identified official channels for dialogue with government counterparts, and developed a plan of action to halt the crisis.

The UNAIDS Secretariat and Cosponsors at the national, regional and global level—including UNDP, UNFPA, UNICEF and WHO, as well as the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, and other international organizations—cooperated closely throughout the crisis. Human rights lawyers were engaged to provide rigorous legal framing to official UN statements on the situation. A special Round Table convened by UNAIDS brought relevant stakeholders together to define and reach consensus on a joint action plan.

“It was extremely important that UNAIDS was able to mobilize all partners in the country. UNAIDS’ efforts make it an invaluable partner for the civil sector and allow us to offer help to our clients despite the complicated situation in the country.”

Severa Rahimova, Deputy Director, Guli Surkh (Dushanbe-Based HIV Advocacy NGO)
The rapid and forceful response coordinated by UNAIDS ushered in immediate relief when the Tajik Government, including the Ministry of Health and Social Protection and the Ministry of Internal Affairs, agreed to end the police campaign. As a result, from early fall 2014 no national law enforcement actions were taken against sex workers, men who have sex with men, and people who inject drugs.

Government readiness and willingness to consider the evidence and take action was instrumental in the successful resolution of the crisis. Due to the highly participatory approach and open communication among all stakeholders, human rights actors succeeded in developing the National Strategic Plan on HIV/AIDS for 2015-2017. The Strategic Plan, as well as the recently updated National HIV Law, distinctly recognize and promote the rights of key populations.

Using the National Strategic Plan as a springboard, UNAIDS, in close cooperation with government representatives, conducted training sessions to raise awareness among law enforcement agencies, representatives of decision-making bodies, civil society organizations, regional AIDS centres, and communities to put an end to HIV-related rights violations among key populations and women, including improving access to quality HIV-related services. Through these training sessions, UNAIDS established a stronger and more sustainable partnership with the Tajik Government as well as with law enforcement agencies and local communities, enabling all actors to prevent and mitigate future HIV-related crises.

Renewed crackdown

Amidst a shifting national and regional political climate, the cease in the crackdown came to an end in early 2016 when the Prosecutor's Office in the Sogd region issued warrants to inspect NGOs working with sex workers and men who have sex with men. Because these organizations are viewed by the state as promoting and enabling sex work and same-sex relations, the State Prosecutor initiated a campaign to shut them down.

The renewed crackdown will likely have grave consequences for Tajikistan’s HIV response. NGOs that are led by and represent the interests of key populations are essential in advocating for a robust response to the epidemic, delivering services that can reach everyone in need and tackling HIV-related stigma and discrimination. Working alongside public health, justice and other systems, community responses are critical to the success and sustainability of the Tajik response to HIV. The targeting and shutting down of organizations working with key populations in Tajikistan means that HIV prevention services will be harder to reach for the people who need them most.

“UNFPA appreciates UNAIDS’ efforts to coordinate UN action, ensure the involvement of community members and sensitize law enforcement to the needs of key populations in Tajikistan. I believe we would never succeed as a sole agency and without the leadership and guidance of UNAIDS.”

Dr. Aziza Hamidova, Assistant Representative, UNFPA, Tajikistan
Leaving no one behind: taking action to build a more inclusive and effective HIV response

Asiya (name changed), a civil society representative in the country, says civil society’s partnerships with UNAIDS are crucial for having their voices heard at the state level, thanks to the UN’s influence, legitimacy and capacity to convene high-level government officials. UNAIDS is committed to continue encouraging adequate political space and financial support for civil society to operate and contribute to a people-centred, rights-based AIDS response. Much of the critically important work in the response to HIV—including broadening the reach of services, increasing demand, supporting retention in care, advancing human rights, combatting stigma and discrimination, and monitoring quality—can only be achieved with a strong community voice and presence.

To ensure that HIV services are accessible for the people who need them most, and to bring an end to the latest crackdown in Tajikistan, UNAIDS is also working to strengthen public awareness of the HIV epidemic, to reinforce the capacity of the state to implement an AIDS response that meets the needs of key populations, and to sensitize law enforcement. The UNAIDS Country Office, for example, is carrying out information campaigns in cooperation with state institutions, including the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the National Committee on Women and Family Affairs, local government representatives, and international organizations. Together they aim to strengthen public awareness of HIV-related stigma and discrimination, gender equality, and the protection of the rights of people living with and at risk of HIV. UNAIDS is also working with the media on ensuring stigma-free and evidence-informed coverage of the epidemic to empower a better-informed public.

To support law enforcement that is in line with human rights standards and public health objectives, UNAIDS and national human rights institutions are offering training to police and prison guards to promote their understanding of HIV and to develop the skills and attitudes necessary to protect and promote the rights of people living with HIV, women and members of vulnerable populations.

The international community has committed to the target of ending AIDS by 2030 as part of the UN Sustainable Development Goals agenda. We will not succeed until key populations are able to live free from fear and fully enjoy their rights, including equal access to lifesaving HIV services. With a mandate to speak out in defense of dignity, human rights and gender equality, and in solidarity with the people most affected by HIV, UNAIDS stands shoulder-to-shoulder with all people living with, at risk of and affected by HIV. Ours is a collective, common struggle to end AIDS and HIV-related stigma and discrimination.

“We must work to ensure that no one is left behind because of who they are or who they love. Men who have sex with men and sex workers everywhere are at high risk of HIV and yet continue to be stigmatized, marginalized and unable to access HIV services. This is why, together, we must endeavour to break the bonds of discrimination, prejudice and exclusion.”

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Explore the entire ‘UNAIDS in Focus’ series here:
https://results.unaids.org/documents

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The Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) leads and inspires the world to achieve its shared vision of zero new HIV infections, zero discrimination and zero AIDS-related deaths. UNAIDS unites the efforts of 11 UN organizations—UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP, UNDP, UNFPA, UNODC, UN Women, ILO, UNESCO, WHO and the World Bank—and works closely with global and national partners towards ending the AIDS epidemic by 2030 as part of the Sustainable Development Goals. Learn more at unaids.org and connect with us on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube.