
PORTUGAL

UNITED NATIONS

**High-Level Meeting on the
Comprehensive Review of the progress achieved in
realizing the Declaration of Commitment on HIV/AIDS and the Political
Declaration on HIV/AIDS**

**Statement by
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Mr. President,
Ladies and Gentlemen

Portugal fully aligns itself with the statement delivered by the European Union.

Portugal faced one of the most extensive HIV epidemics in Western Europe. However, three decades into the epidemic, considerable progress has been made:

- we were able to significantly decrease the number of AIDS cases and deaths;
- we virtually eliminate mother to child transmission;
- we dramatically decrease the transmission among injecting drug users.

We also registered great advances in the promotion of voluntary and free HIV testing - directed at the general population and at the most affected communities - and we guarantee universal access to treatment. Knowing one's epidemic is the major catalyst to success in fighting HIV.

In Portugal, the epidemic was mainly driven by unsafe drug injection, although all major vulnerable populations are affected. HIV still has a high prevalence not only among drug users, prison inmates, sex workers and migrants from highly endemic countries, but also among men who have sex with men – the single community facing a recent increase in the number of new diagnosis.

Our policies and preventive efforts integrate a human rights based approach and are centered on the best available scientific knowledge.

- Be it the launching of a needle and syringe exchange program in the mid nineties, followed by the decriminalization of drug consumption and possession for individual use a decade ago, along with the country wide generalization of opiod substitution therapy, to include the prison setting, also made an extraordinary difference in our fight against the epidemic.
- Or the scaling up of evidence-based options for treatment of drug dependence as well as funding of measures that address drug treatment and harm reduction as endorsed by the World Health Organization and the United Nations. This scientific and human rights based approach should also be the basis for abolishing ineffective compulsory approaches.

These actions require the active engagement of people who use drugs, through the establishment of a supportive environment, namely by replacing the criminalization and punishment of people who use drugs with the offer of health and treatment services while also addressing Tuberculosis, hepatitis C and overdose.

Our objective is to reduce the number of new infections and get more people the treatment and support they need, while realizing the rights to health, dignity, social protection and justice guaranteed by our Constitution and in line with our international human rights obligations.

Mr. President

We are fully aware of the fact that a successful HIV response demands adequate financing to effective prevention, treatment, support and care, both in our own country and as part of the global efforts. Treatment must be recognized as a major preventive intervention that influences the social dynamics of the epidemic beyond individual needs and rights.

In the last five years Portugal was able to double the number of people on antiretroviral treatment. This was a critical measure to control the epidemic but it also put a major financial burden on our National Health Service.

Antiretrovirals need to be affordable and we urge the international community to find ways that allow for a sustainable access to treatment that does not jeopardize the overall health system.

Mr. President

During the 2006 High-level Meeting of the General Assembly on HIV/AIDS, Portugal reiterated its support to the Declaration of Commitment and emphasized the importance of political involvement at the highest level, the essential role of civil society and the central contribution of people living with HIV and AIDS. Again, in 2008, Portugal reaffirmed such commitments and called attention to the importance of implementing the Dublin and the Bremen Declarations, as well as to the need for monitoring its implementation.

Allow me now, Mr. President, to reinforce the central role played by people living with HIV and AIDS in the shaping of the Portuguese response to the epidemic, as well as the fundamental contribution of the Civil Society Forum and its organizations in fighting stigma and discrimination. We believe this collaborative approach is the way to proceed if we aim to achieve a world with zero discrimination.

The achievements in the response to HIV, so dramatically expressed in the recent decline of new infections in some regions of the world, have been the result of strong international commitment and national leadership. In our globalized world, with free trade and free movement of people, cooperation at regional level is of the utmost importance and the advantages of linguistic and cultural bonds cannot be disregarded. In fact they can contribute to efficient partnerships and to a more effective translation of principles and knowledge into practice.

Currently Portugal is the coordinator for the AIDS Programs of the Community of Portuguese Speaking Countries. Also, in 2007 we promoted the first Meeting of National Aids Coordinators of the twenty seven EU Member States and Neighbouring Countries. These were and remain crucial opportunities for cooperation, mutual learning and a better understanding of appropriate solutions. We believe they deserve to be replicated and expanded.

Mr. President,

Having in mind the magnitude of the HIV epidemic, the impact of the infection on the labour force, the challenging inequalities we face all over the world, it becomes clear that scaling up all components of HIV prevention remains an urgent objective.

Also, HIV2 - a sort of orphan infection, HIV/TB co-infection and the re-organization of health services that it requires, ask for renewed attention and innovative responses.

And, last but not least, we cannot forget that the continued gender inequalities, the prevailing gender stereotypes and gender based violence play a fundamental role in increasing HIV risk and vulnerability, therefore we strongly believe that sexual and reproductive health and rights should be respected and promoted.

Thank you.