

Statement by UNAIDS to the International Meeting to
review the implementation of the Programme of
Action for the Sustainable Development of Small
Island Developing States.

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Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for the opportunity to address this important meeting.

It is my pleasure to address you on behalf of the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), which brings together the collective experience and resources of 10 Cosponsoring agencies and reflects the will of the international community to counter the HIV/AIDS epidemic, by matching it in both its scale and complexity.

For this epidemic is undeniably massive and complex. An estimated 40 million individuals currently live with the virus, but it touches the lives of many more and no country has been spared its effects.

While it may be tempting to view HIV/AIDS simply as a health problem, caused by a virus and driven by temptation and the frailties of the human condition, the situation is in reality, much more complex. By tracking the weaknesses in societies *inter alia*, poverty, wide social and economic disparities, the lack of education, the absence of basic services and gender inequality and propelled by ignorance, fear, stigma and discrimination, the epidemic easily reaches the most vulnerable and in so doing, wreaks a toll that exceeds anything that mankind has experienced thus far.

Mr. Chairman, while this meeting does not need to be reminded of the importance of tourism to the economies of many developing countries, it is nevertheless worth emphasizing the role that mobility plays in HIV transmission, be it in pursuit of safety, economic opportunity or pleasure.

The fact that HIV/AIDS is both a consequence of and a contributing factor to underdevelopment, has important implications for SIDS, who despite ranking middle to high on the human development index, display a range of vulnerabilities that place them at heightened risk to HIV/AIDS. Indeed, the fact that the Caribbean is the second worst affected region after sub Saharan Africa, substantiates this assertion. Indeed

This bi-directional and mutually reinforcing interaction between HIV/AIDS and underdevelopment, also highlights the importance of embedding HIV/AIDS programmes within the appropriate social, economic and political context, irrespective of a country's size, location and current HIV prevalence.

Given this broader understanding, it is gratifying to see that addressing HIV/AIDS is now being included as an important focus of this meeting and in the actions that will follow.

AIDS is now the leading cause of death amongst adults aged 15 - 44 in the Caribbean. Indeed in five countries, national HIV prevalence now exceeds 2%. While HIV prevalence rates in the Pacific are generally low, with the possible

exception of PNG, the signs of high vulnerability are starkly evident, especially in the form of high rates of sexually transmitted infections.

But despite the multiple obstacles faced by SIDS, including small populations dispersed over large distances, limited human capacity and financial resources, the countries of the Caribbean have demonstrated that much can be achieved through political will and regional cooperation, by rolling out prevention and treatment programmes that are amongst the most ambitious in the world. The international community looks forward to adding the Caribbean to the short but growing list of countries that have successfully contained this epidemic.

Similarly, the low prevalence rates currently seen in the Pacific represent a unique window of opportunity, when the immediate application of intense prevention efforts, can avert much more serious epidemics in the near term. It is a sobering thought that HIV prevalence amongst young people in South Africa, the country with highest number of people living with HIV/AIDS, rose from 5 – 25% in just over a decade.

Mr. Chairman, the international community has, in the Declaration of Commitment adopted at the UN Special Session on HIV/AIDS, a global framework by which to address the problem and will conduct an interim review of progress in June 2005. Addressing HIV/AIDS is also a major objective of the Millennium Declaration and indeed, one of the Millennium Development goals. We would go further and argue that for many countries around the world, addressing HIV/AIDS is an essential prerequisite to reaching most of the other Millennium Development Goals.

Mr. Chairman, may I conclude by reiterating that HIV/AIDS shares common roots with many of the other challenges that this meeting will consider. But given sufficient will and international solidarity, we remain convinced that it is within our power to overcome these challenges and thereby effect positive changes to the lives of the most vulnerable in our societies.

I thank you.