



Regional Parliamentary Conference for the Great Lakes Region: “Towards an AIDS free generation”

KAMPALA, UGANDA, 23-25 OCTOBER 2008



Parliamentarians from the Great Lakes Region committed themselves to action plans on how they, and their Parliaments, can contribute towards an AIDS free generation.

The Regional Parliamentary Conference for the Great Lakes Region on the theme “Towards an AIDS free generation” sought to “further define Parliamentary action towards HIV and AIDS, with a focus on Orphans and Vulnerable Children (OVC)”. The East African Legislative Assembly (EALA), the Parliament of Uganda, The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), the International AIDS Vaccine Initiative (IAVI) and AWEPA co-organised the Conference, which brought together over one hundred and forty participants. Attendees included Members from nine African Parliaments and EALA, as well as Members of seven European Parliaments, international experts, development partners, journalists and representatives from IAVI and AWEPA.

The Conference provided an opportunity for parliamentarians across the region to share experiences with their European counterparts. The parliamentarians discussed, shared and updated their National Parliamentary Plans of Action (NPPA) for OVC, while focusing on issues highlighted during the Conference, including: Social Protection through the use of Cash Transfers; Birth and Death Registration (BDR); Prevention of Mother to Child Transmission (PMTCT); and information about developments in the search for an AIDS vaccine. At the end of the Conference the participants issued a Concluding Statement.

Results

CONCLUDING STATEMENT

Following discussions during the plenary and working group sessions, participants proposed a range of action points on how they and their Parliament could contribute towards an AIDS free generation.

Besides monitoring the progress that parliaments had made towards implementing NPPAs for OVC, the Concluding Statement urged parliamentarians in attendance to:

- Distribute information collected at the Conference to other Members of Parliament (including the AWEPA/UNICEF/UNAIDS Handbook on OVC and the IPU Handbook “Taking Action against HIV”);
- Collect information on OVC care and support by Governments and NGOs, and conduct assessments on current performance of governments in addressing the needs of OVC;
- Encourage partnerships between Parliamentarians and citizens (including children and youth) living with HIV,

to ensure policy implementation and accountability;

- Collect information about the existing laws on HIV/AIDS that have been passed in the region and share this information with parliaments across the region to improve the legislation;
- Discuss a set of actions to help accelerate the development of new preventive technologies, such as AIDS vaccines and microbicides. •

NATIONAL PARLIAMENTARY PLANS OF ACTION (NPPA) FOR OVC

Examples of action points from the different NPPAs for OVC include calls for parliamentarians to:

- Advocate for an HIV/AIDS and OVC Sub Committee of the Health Committee to address the HIV/AIDS Prevention and Control Act (Kenya);
- Mobilise, advocate and lobby for updating and harmonising the legal framework for protection of OVC (Uganda);
- Oversee the implementation process of Prevention of Mother-To-Child Transmission (PMTCT) (Tanzania);

- Adopt the Child Protection Law (Rwanda);
- Follow closely the pre-elections and election processes of the Youth Parliament (Burundi);
- Establish an HIV/AIDS Committee (Republic of Congo);
- Earmark money for the Ministries concerned to fight HIV/AIDS and protect OVC (Democratic Republic of Congo);
- Advocate for an HIV/AIDS and OVC Sub Committee under the Health Committee to address the Child Act (Southern Sudan).

European parliamentarians also formed a working group and came up with a list of action points which they are planning to implement in the fight against HIV and AIDS, for instance: to form partnerships between European and African Parliaments in order to monitor spending on HIV and AIDS on a Parliament-to-Parliament basis; and to organise workshops in each European Parliament. •

Background

Whilst children remain at grave risk of the social and health consequences of HIV, leadership and action for children are crucial in the fight against the epidemic. Worldwide, it is estimated that more than 15 million children under the age of 18 have been orphaned as a result of AIDS. More than 12 million of these children live in Sub-Saharan Africa, where it is currently estimated that 9% of all children have lost at least one parent to AIDS. ●

Prior to the Regional Conference, the International AIDS Vaccine Initiative (IAVI) and AWEPA organised a parliamentary field visit to the Uganda Virus Research Institute (UVRI) in Entebbe. UVRI contributes to research and development of an HIV vaccine, as one of the potential New Prevention Technologies (NPTs). A delegation of parliamentarians commenced by visiting one of the fishing communities on the shores of Lake Victoria, where UVRI and IAVI had recently initiated an HIV

epidemiological and social science research project. The parliamentarians learned that in Uganda, whilst the fishing industry is an important source of food and employment, the spread of HIV among fishing communities is up to five times higher than in the general population and poses a major threat to the communities' survival and existence. The delegation later visited the UVRI Research complex in Entebbe, where researchers described the types of scientific research the centre conducts. ●

Speeches

OPENING SESSION

Hon. Abdirahin Haithar Abdi, Speaker of the East African Legislative Assembly, noted that despite all the efforts to fight HIV, the virus seems to continue to spread. Hon. Abdi presented a recent study in Uganda which shows that new infections occur within the age ranges of 30-35 years for women and 40-45 for men, of which most sufferers are married. The report attributed the increase in the spread of HIV/AIDS to married men who have several sexual partners. Hon. Abdi commented that the "*Result of this is an increase in orphans and vulnerable children and unless effective measures are put in place, the survival of the whole generation is at stake.*" He strongly urged parliamentarians to undertake actions, for example to:

- Ensure that all national policies include HIV/AIDS components which are integral to a national relief programme;
- Create collaborative networks of MPs with Civil Society Organisations dealing with HIV/AIDS;
- Ensure that political messages to the constituencies alert all citizens to the dangers of HIV/AIDS and the need for all to protect themselves against it;
- Ensure that parliaments design special programmes to take care of OVC with regard to education, health and other social issues;
- Lead the crusade by example.

Hon. Edward Kiwanuka Ssekandi, the Speaker of the Parliament of Uganda, emphasised the importance of scaling up the parliamentary efforts on behalf of OVC. The Speaker outlined Uganda's experience in fighting HIV/AIDS and noted that while there were significant achievements in the past, the availability

of drugs has led to complacency, escalating the problem. AIDS has had a devastating impact on Uganda, with approximately one million people who have died due to AIDS and a reduction of the life expectancy to below 50 years of age. Hon. Ssekandi called for further research on infection trends and behaviour, to identify why the trends occur and how to track them.

Ms. Faith Kisakye, a youth participant and member of the Ariel Children's Club, shared with the participants her testimony about her life as a child living with HIV/AIDS. She talked about the stigma faced by children in her situation and the need for support groups, such as the Ariel Children's Club, to help the children to cope.

Dr. Florence Mangyu, Senior Advisor, International AIDS Vaccine Initiative (IAVI), Country and Regional Programmes, spoke about IAVI's involvement in key research activities for an AIDS Vaccine, including the work that partners and scientists, both in the North and South, undertake on AIDS vaccine trials. In addition to vaccine research and trials, IAVI supports community work in the area of HIV/AIDS education, counselling and mobilisation. Dr. Mangyu called upon the Parliamentarians to support investment in the search for a vaccine, and address the issue of affordability and accessibility to ARVs.

Dr. Karen B. Allen, UNICEF Deputy Representative in Uganda, gave an overview of the issues that face vulnerable children in the Great Lakes Region. Dr. Allen described how the nature of



childhood has changed fundamentally for children living in seriously affected communities, with children losing even their basic rights to shelter, health and development. She called upon the parliamentarians to work for an AIDS free generation; to ensure government allocates a minimum 15% of all treatment resources to children; and to provide for modern laws and enforcement that require birth and death registration for all citizens. ●

SOCIAL PROTECTION FOR VULNERABLE FAMILIES

Ms. Mary Mbuga, Assistant Director of Children's Affairs, Ministry of Gender, Kenya, explained to the participants how a Cash Transfer Programme responds effectively to issues of OVC in Kenya. In November 2004, the Kenyan Government and development partners launched a pilot programme targeting 500 OVC in three districts in which each household was given 500 Kenya Shillings (approximately five Euros) per month with funds from UNICEF. Since then, the government and its partners have increased funding for this Cash Transfer Programme up to US\$18.7 million for 2008/2009, so that in 2009 the programme will have reached 65,000 households. ●

Dr. Godfrey Esiru, Ministry of Health, Uganda, spoke about Uganda's milestones in the area of Prevention of Mother-To-Child Transmission (PMTCT), a programme that seeks to reduce MTCT of HIV by 50% by the year 2010. He explained the PMTCT strategies and highlighted the situation of pediatric HIV/AIDS. The number of children accessing Anti Retroviral Treatment (ART) has increased, whilst the health facilities that provide ART to children have also increased from 47 to 174. The programme saves over 12,000 children from infection and death from HIV. ●

ROLE OF PARLIAMENTARIANS IN THE RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT OF NEW HIV PREVENTION TECHNOLOGIES

Dr. Pontiano Kaleebu, Principal Investigator of IAVI Uganda Virus Research Institute, outlined in his presentation facts about the global and national epidemic, its impact and the challenges of developing an AIDS Vaccine. Dr. Kaleebu called upon the parliamentarians to advocate for financial and political support for the development of the AIDS vaccine. These efforts should include: actions to promote global support for product development and public-private partnerships (PPPs), which deliver specific health products; initiatives to foster effective partnerships between researchers in the North and South; and development of national AIDS vaccine plans within national AIDS strategies, including support for infrastructure around trial sites.

Dr. Kihumuro Apuuli, Director General, Uganda AIDS Commission, addressed the causes of change in Uganda's progress in the fight against AIDS. He noted that resources were drawn away from the prevention strategies, to promote a scaling up of access to free ARVs. Even after this initiative only 141,000 people have access to ARVs, out of the 350,000 people who need them. Dr. Apuuli therefore made the case for bio-medical technologies, such as an AIDS vaccine, saying "*it is clear that we cannot treat ourselves out of this epidemic*". Dr. Apuuli shared findings on a study "Assessing the macroeconomic impact of HIV/AIDS in Uganda" which indicates the negative impact AIDS will have on the rate of economic growth in Uganda, stating that by 2025 Uganda's economy will be 39% smaller than it would have been without the impact of AIDS. ●

PARLIAMENTARY ACTION FOR VULNERABLE CHILDREN

Dr. Urban Jonsson, Executive Director of The Owls and former Regional Director of UNICEF in East and Southern Africa, addressed in his presentation the common myths about HIV/AIDS, current consensus on important facts about the scourge, what it means to be a parliamentarian and general recommendations on how to address the challenge of HIV/AIDS. Dr. Jonsson stated that "*HIV is not a health problem; it is a societal problem with very severe health implications. The solution is seldom generic; it depends strongly on the context.*" He urged the parliamentarians to talk about sex and sexuality in clear and understandable terms, to ensure that people grasp issues about the disease, without the hindrances of obscuring the truth. Dr. Jonsson concluded: "*It is in the best interest of the child that their parents live as long as possible to avoid orphanhood. It is therefore the right of the child to have their parents alive.*"

Hon. Chris Baryomunsi, Member of Parliament of Uganda and Member of the HIV/AIDS Committee, informed the participants about the IPU Handbook "Taking Action against HIV". He discussed the parliamentary responsibilities of oversight, legislation, representation and the allocation of resources, stating that, in these leadership roles, parliamentarians can initiate key actions to address the HIV/AIDS challenge. Hon. Baryomunsi explored the actions that parliamentarians can take to break public silence regarding HIV/AIDS issues, end ignorance and prejudice, and mobilise resources for children. He also described how parliamentarians can develop laws and policies that protect affected children, support PMTCT of HIV, hold government to account for their promises, and advocate for affordable medicines for children. ●



Hon. Syda Bumba, Minister of Finance and Economic Development (former Minister of Gender, Labour and Social Development)

CLOSING REMARKS

Hon. Syda Bumba, Former Minister for Gender, Labour and Social Development, expressed the urgency of addressing the plight of the 105,000 children under the age of fourteen years old, living with HIV/AIDS in Uganda. Minister Bumba urged the Parliamentarians to enact laws, pass pro-children budgets and hold service providers accountable, both in the public and private spheres, for resource allocated to prevent and treat HIV. Minister Bumba pledged the Ugandan Government's support for parliamentary actions for the safety and survival of the millions of children in need of care and protection.

Dr. Jan Nico Scholten, President of AWEPA, drew the participants' attention to the presentations made on Social Protection interventions and the importance of Birth and Death Registration (BDR) in protecting the rights of OVC. He noted that two out of three children in Sub-Saharan Africa are not registered. Furthermore, Dr. Scholten stated that the system of social protection should be given more consideration in other African countries. He urged the parliamentarians to implement their NPPAs and organise national follow-up workshops to disseminate information on HIV/AIDS and OVC. ●



Hon. Edward Kiwanuka Ssekandi, Speaker, Parliament of Uganda



Right: Hon. Abdirahin Haithar Abdi, Speaker, East African Legislative Assembly

Programme Descriptions

The Regional Conference in Kampala provided an important follow-up to the “Regional Parliamentary Conference for the Great Lakes Region: Towards Universal Access to HIV/AIDS Prevention, Treatment, Care and Support”, which took place in Nairobi on 18 and 19 April 2007. The Netherlands supports this regional programme.

This Conference also occurred in the context of AWEPA’s EALA Programme.

The East African Legislative Assembly (EALA), which consists of representatives from the five Member States of the East African Community (Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi), is a legislative body with oversight functions regarding all matters that fall within the Community’s work. The Irish Government funds AWEPA’s programme with EALA. ●



More information

Please refer to the “Projects” section at www.awepa.org for more information on the Regional Conference, including the Concluding Statement, press release and presentations.

About AWEPA

AWEPA is an international non-governmental organisation which works in cooperation with African Parliaments to strengthen parliamentary democracy in Africa, keep Africa high on the political agenda in Europe and facilitate African-European parliamentary dialogue. From Southern Sudan to South Africa, AWEPA has served as a unique tool for complex democratisation operations.

The pillars that support AWEPA’s work include:

- **A membership skills base** of more than 1500 European parliamentarians, who devote their wide-ranging expertise to peer learning with African colleagues.
- **Long-term partnerships** with African parliamentary colleagues, which ensure local ownership and accountability.
- **An infrastructure** of political and parliamentary entry points, which spans 9 African and 2 European offices as well as 25 parliaments in Africa and 28 in Europe, including the Pan-African Parliament and the European Parliament. ●

The Way Forward

As a follow-up to the Regional Parliamentary Conference for the Great Lakes Region: “Towards an AIDS free generation” AWEPA will facilitate national follow-up workshops on the theme of fighting HIV/AIDS, with a focus on OVC in 2009. These workshops will take place in Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Burundi, Rwanda, Democratic Republic of Congo and the Republic of Congo. These national workshops will address the revised National Parliamentary Plans of Action for OVC, as well as the other outcomes of the different working groups.

In addition, it is the intention of AWEPA to organise an additional Regional Parliamentary Conference in Kampala in the second half of 2009, during which parliamentarians of the region can share with their colleagues what parliamentarians have done in each country since the Conference in October 2008. ●

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