



Organized under the theme of Universal Action Now, AIDS 2008 brought together leading experts and advocates from all over the world.

AIDS 2008 convenes in Mexico City

Stigma and discrimination highlighted

With the deadline fast approaching for achieving the sixth Millennium Development Goal of providing universal access to HIV prevention, treatment, care and support by 2010, all eyes were on Mexico City early August for the XVII International AIDS Conference (AIDS 2008). Held under the theme of Universal Action Now, AIDS 2008 sought to highlight the need for continued urgency in the worldwide response to HIV/AIDS and to push for action and commitment on the part of all stakeholders. OFID Information Officer, Audrey Haylins, reports.

PHOTOS: INTERNATIONAL AIDS SOCIETY/MONDAPHOTO

AIDS 2008 was a seminal event – the largest conference ever held in the Latin America and Caribbean region – drawing some 24,000 participants from over 190 countries. Stakeholders across the entire HIV/AIDS spectrum were represented, from scientists, advocates and community leaders, to policy makers and donors. They faced a challenging agenda: to evaluate progress towards the 2010 target and identify strategies for accelerating the scale-up of prevention, treatment and care.

The conference was opened by Mexican President Felipe Calderón Hinohosa, who was joined on the podium by a host of other political leaders and HIV/AIDS advocates. They included, among others, Dr. Pedro Cahn, Conference Chair and President of the International AIDS Society (IAS); José Angel Cordova Villalobos, Mexican Secretary of Health; Ban Ki-moon, Secretary-General of the United Nations; Margaret Chan, Director-General of the World Health Organization; Dr. Peter Piot, Executive Director of the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS; Denzil Douglas, Prime Minister of St Kitts & Nevis; and María Teresa Fernández de la Vega, First Vice-President of Spain.

In an inaugural address, Dr. Pedro Cahn highlighted some of the obstacles hindering the global AIDS offensive and urged the international community to “do



Mexico City's National Auditorium was filled to capacity for the opening session of AIDS 2008. UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon was one of a number of distinguished speakers.



Pedro Cahn, President, International AIDS Society, and AIDS 2008 Conference Chair.

better" in its response. "Too many lives depend on us; too many lives have already been lost; countless more are in peril," he said, pointing to funding, research and human rights as areas of special weakness.

UNAIDS Executive-Director Dr. Peter Piot agreed that much more had to be done, but expressed encouragement at some of the successes to date. "For the first time fewer people are dying of AIDS and fewer people are becoming infected with HIV," he said. "This is cause for great encouragement, but it is not cause for complacency and it is certainly far too early for declaring victory, because the end of AIDS is nowhere in sight," he added.

Stigma and discrimination

Central to the five days of deliberations were discussions on how to tackle the underlying drivers of HIV risk and vulnerability, namely gender inequality, human rights violations and HIV-related stigma and discrimination. Widespread consensus emerged that fear of violence, discrimination and unwarranted prosecution prevent many people living with or at risk of HIV from seeking testing and treatment. These vulnerable groups include injecting drug users, sex workers and men who have sex with men, as well as women and youth.

"In far too many places, stigma and discrimination continue to fuel counterproductive laws and policies that undermine prevention and treatment scale-up, said Dr. Luís Soto Ramírez, Local Co-Chair of AIDS 2008. "Confronting such policies head-on, and demanding that they be changed, is a central component of any HIV prevention strategy. HIV is a viral infection, not a moral infection and even less a political one," he added.

His views were echoed by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, who called on politicians around the world "to speak out against discrimination and protect the rights of people living with and affected by HIV, for schools to teach respect, for religious leaders to preach tolerance, and for the media to condemn prejudice in all its forms." ▶



Left: Pedro Cahn greets Mexican President, Felipe Calderón Hinohosa, who opened the Conference. Right: Twenty-five community organizations received Red Ribbon Awards for services to fighting AIDS.



Combining prevention and treatment

◀ Another key outcome of the conference was the concept of “combination prevention,” which proposes a more holistic approach to curbing HIV transmission by making treatment one of the components of prevention.

“We have finally accepted the fact that an effective vaccine is not going to be around any time soon,” said Dr. Julio Montaner, AIDS 2010 International Chair and IAS President 2008 – 2010. This acceptance, he said, had moved the prevention field onto “a very sophisticated level,” where traditional measures, such as awareness and safe practices, were complemented by antiretroviral treatment as part of an enhanced combination package.

HIV/AIDS Fact File

- In 2007 an estimated 33.2 million people worldwide were living with HIV; around two million of them children.
- An estimated 2.5 million people were newly infected with HIV in 2007.
- In 2007, an estimated 2.1 million people died of AIDS-related causes.
- Sub-Saharan Africa is home to 67 per cent of all people living with HIV worldwide and home to 90 per cent of all children living with HIV.
- The onset of AIDS can take up to ten years from the time of infection with the HIV virus.
- Most children are infected with the virus while still in the womb, during birth or while breastfeeding.
- More than 12 million African children have lost one or both parents to AIDS.
- Three million people receive HIV-suppressing drugs in poor countries, although this is still only 31 per cent of the total who need them.
- US\$10 billion was spent on fighting HIV/AIDS in poor countries in 2007 – more than US\$8 billion short of what was needed. Funding will have to increase by 50 per cent by 2010 to maintain the current increase in drug access.

Sources: UNAIDS and WHO

The potential of highly active antiretroviral therapy (HAART) as an aid to HIV prevention was highlighted in a study presented at the conference by experts from the British Columbia Center for Excellence in HIV/AIDS. According to the study, an increase in HAART coverage could dramatically decrease the number of new infections and save money for healthcare systems around the globe.

Funding issues

AIDS 2008 also put to rest criticism that too much money was being channelled into HIV/AIDS and that national health systems were suffering as a result. In fact, the reverse was true, according to experts at a special session held to discuss the complementary nature of improving health systems in developing countries and broadening access to HIV prevention and treatment.

“We know that building clinics and laboratories, training healthcare workers and working with ministries of health to deliver HIV programs means stronger health systems for everyone,” said Dr. Cahn. Efforts were ongoing, he pointed out, to integrate tuberculosis, sexual and reproductive health, primary care and perinatal health into HIV services, thereby benefiting everyone in need. “The truth is that in many places for millions of people for the first time there is a nurse and a doctor and a lab for a patient living with HIV, and he or she will have someone to care for them,” Dr. Cahn said, adding, “It is a time for collaboration, not competition.”

Final comments

AIDS 2008 closed with a call on UN Member States to follow up on their commitment to achieve universal access to HIV prevention, care and treatment by 2010, and in doing so to actively include the most at risk populations – as identified at the conference – in the HIV/AIDS response.

The XVIII International AIDS Conference will take place in Vienna, Austria, July 18 – 23, 2010. ■



OFID exhibition stand draws large crowds

PHOTO: A. SENUSSI

OFID's participation in AIDS 2008 took place on three levels: as a sponsor, as an exhibitor and as a delegation to the conference itself. As an active player in the global battle against the disease, OFID works hard to keep up-to-date with all the latest developments, from research to the wider management of the pandemic. For this purpose, the conference was invaluable. It was also an opportunity for OFID to network, to meet with partners and to explore ways and means of optimizing its contribution to the worldwide effort.

Alongside the conference, the AIDS 2008 Exhibition attracted over 130 exhibitors, ranging from large pharmaceutical companies and grassroots NGOs to individual countries and multilateral organizations. OFID's colourful exhibit highlighted the developmental impact of HIV/AIDS and showcased OFID's efforts at achieving a better quality of life for poor people in developing countries. The stand drew hundreds of visitors and was a hub for much of the institution's networking activities throughout the conference period.

OFID's Special Grant Account for HIV/AIDS Operations was launched in 2001. Since then, the institution has set aside US\$65 million in dedicated resources to help finance interventions ranging from prevention and awareness to counselling, care, treatment and support. OFID's HIV/AIDS mandate was recently widened to encompass research and clinical trials together with support to vulnerable children. Today, OFID is working with a broad coalition of partners to fight the pandemic in close to 100 countries. ■



PHOTO: H. ABU JURJI

OFID's exhibition stand was a hub for networking and disseminating information.