

Treatnet creates rehab centers, takes other steps to minimize spread of HIV

The incidence of sexually-transmitted HIV/AIDS in developing countries remains a grave problem. A relatively new phenomenon, however, is unprecedented levels of HIV owing to a growing number of injecting drug users. In this interview for the OFID Newsletter, Anna Ilaria-Mayrhofer of the Department of Information, speaks with **Mr. Antonio Maria Costa**, Executive Director of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). Mr. Costa was at OFID to sign a US\$3 million grant agreement in support of the program *Treatnet*. Below, he outlines some of the reasons for rising drug use in developing countries and explains why *Treatnet* was conceived.



Mr. Antonio Maria Costa, Executive Director of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime.

PHOTO: B. BARAJDE

“*Treatnet* is a very important way of keeping people informed around the world of the most successful methods of dealing with HIV and drug addiction,” says Costa, who added that “with the spreading of best practices and sharing of experiences, the method has proved to be a vital development.”

Treatnet was established in 2005 by the UNODC, in conjunction with partners that include, the International Labor Organization, the World Health Organization and UNAIDS. Its mandate is to help reduce the demand for drugs, by creating a network of treatment and rehabilitation centers, while at the same time offering HIV/AIDS education and prevention services. Staff working at these centers will be trained to carry out activities in non-judgemental fashion and provide an atmosphere that will encourage users

to seek out centers’ services. Other components of *Treatnet* involve capacity-building and institution-strengthening across governments at all levels, as well as among healthcare providers and those working in prison settings.

An instrumental part of *Treatnet’s* strategy is the education of personnel who are working in high-risk setting. For instance, those employed in prison locations often equate condom distribution programs and provision of clean needles and syringes, with condoning illicit behaviours. Extensive research has revealed, however, that incarcerated individuals provided with such items, are less likely to share needles and engage in unprotected sexual encounters. Mr. Costa observes that “voluntary organizations and NGOs are often the most open in providing treatment and shelter facilities as well as

advisory services. Treatnet, therefore, brings together these operatives – people connected with the ground-to-ground reality of these addicts.”

The practice of taking psychoactive and hallucinogenic substances is a phenomenon that can be traced to prehistoric times. Archaeologists have unearthed remnants of peyote and mescal beans from ancient sites across the world. Also, traces of cannabis and smoking paraphernalia have been discovered in ancient tombs and temples. The belief that some day the world will be rid of illicit substances, and with it, all drug users, could perhaps be viewed as unrealistic.

Thus, many governments around the world, seem to focus on eradicating all forms of illegal drug use and, consequently, mete out harsh punishments for users. It is perhaps understandable that cash-strapped developing countries that are struggling just to provide underserved populations with basic medical services, are less receptive to boosting investments into drug treatment centers. After all, drug addiction is largely viewed as a self-inflicted condition that deserves little sympathy. Regardless of one's views, however, the virus will continue its relentless spread, unless interventions that concentrate on providing injecting drug users with HIV education and prevention services, are made available without fear of reprisal from the authorities. This point is very important because drug users are far more likely to share injecting equipment and also engage in promiscuous, unprotected sexual behaviour.

Mr. Costa asserts that “many resource-poor countries are so ravaged by corruption and crime that there may be no chance for them to reach the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Therefore, instead of focussing only on repressing of illicit activities, *Treatnet* has a broader aim to promote health, justice and security. By helping protect these societies, we believe that we will help make it possible for them to reach the MDGs.”

Nevertheless, developing countries are clearly at an enormous disadvantage. While its clear that the plight of drug addicts in industrialized countries are by ►



PHOTO: UNODC

Treatnet provides HIV/AIDS education and prevention services to alert vulnerable youngsters to the twin dangers of drug addiction and HIV.

For more information about Treatnet, see the website <http://www.unodc.org/treatment/index.html>



PHOTOS: UNODC

By targeting high-risk populations such as prison inmates in a non-judgemental fashion, the *Treatnet* program is helping to reduce the spread of HIV/AIDS among injecting drug users.

◀ no means trouble free, they generally have more services at their disposal. These include needles distribution programs and drug substitution therapy, such as methadone instead of heroin. Mr. Costa says that the UNODC doesn't see the world drug problem as falling but rather as shifting. "Most drug users [in developed countries] don't inject heroin anymore, it's a drug of the past. But in poorer countries, heroin remains an available commodity. In fact, while we're observing lower addiction rates in Europe we are seeing higher ones in some developing countries, especially in Africa." The Africa region, he explains, never really had a widespread drug addiction problem. And while HIV has been present for decades, its primary mode of transmission was through sexual contact, not shared needle use.

One of the reasons for this trend has a particularly sinister aspect. Costa elaborates: "Africa is being attacked – and I use this expression deliberately – by drug traffickers bringing in cocaine, heroin, opium and such. This isn't being done as much to create a market there, although this has certainly been a side-effect, but rather to use Africa as a means of transshipping drugs to Europe." Mr. Costa goes on to explain that "by and large, the African coasts are not very well-protected, and the borders are quite porous which presents a quite serious problem,

that Africa, in particular the poorest countries, has become a battleground for all sorts of traffickers."

Traffickers are therefore preying on low-income countries that are already unstable and experiencing high levels of corruption, thus making it easier to introduce bribery and coercion into the system. Youth who have been reared in such an environment are highly vulnerable to being recruited into helping to carry out drug-related activities. Deprived of an education and lacking job skills to secure decent employment, the prospect of earning money – even at the risk of their lives – seems attractive. Costa emphasized that, "this tragedy will continue unless we can bring development into these countries. If we can provide the young population with jobs and opportunities for a better future, they won't be lured into leading this type of lifestyle."

Continuing, Mr. Costa said, "So many of the problems we encounter here at the UNODC, such as drugs, crime, trafficking, whatever the case may be, can be solved. And while law enforcement plays some role, more importantly, much can be done through promoting development. If we give these people chances that they aren't able to secure for themselves, they will be far less likely to become elements of crime."

The Executive Director also spoke of the need to undertake in-depth studies

that examine the entire scope of the drug problem in low-income countries. While such data is readily available in middle and high-income countries, he points out, this isn't the case in the poorer countries, where carrying out systematic research is difficult and results are uneven. Costa cites some examples of efforts that are underway to gather such data: "India has launched a major household survey and in some regions in Africa, statistical samples are being taken in schools or among vulnerable segments of society, especially youth. This will at least provide us with a rapid assessment score – that's the term we use – to provide us with some of the data we need."

OFID's contribution will specifically help finance a *Treatnet* initiative in developing countries in Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean¹. "Furthermore, the OFID grant represents a major contribution," adds the Director, "and it's an unusual one, as this is a 'niche' that does not receive public funding." Mr. Costa said "we [UNODC] do not have resources of our own, and it's only through a very noble institution such as OFID that we can reach and help these people."

¹ Africa: Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam; Sub-Saharan Africa: Kenya, Sierra Leone, Tanzania Zambia; Latin America and the Caribbean: Colombia, Haiti, Nicaragua, Peru