



PRESS RELEASE

UN Report Draws Parallels with '97 Financial Crisis and its impact on Migrants and AIDS

12 August, Bali—Migrants are left out of current stimulus packages and HIV/AIDS programmes are under threat, warns a UN paper released today at the 9th International Congress on AIDS in Asia and Pacific (ICAAP). The adverse impact of the financial crisis on health and migration is likely to expand, just as it did in the '97 Asian crisis, as currency devaluations lead to higher drug prices, donor funding declines, and government programs are cut, says the report.

Issued jointly by the UN Development Programme (UNDP), the International Labor Organization (ILO) and the Joint Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), the paper (*"The threat posed by the economic crisis to Universal Access to HIV services for migrants"*), makes predictions on migration policies and HIV/AIDS programmes which mirror trends from the '97 financial crisis.

"It is critical that policy makers don't make the same decisions that were made in '97 vis-à-vis cuts to essential HIV/AIDS programmes, and adverse policies that worked against migrant workers. In contrast to the massive stimulus packages that countries are launching to boost their economies, AIDS spending for a comprehensive response represents a mere 0.01% of such programmes", said Caitlin Wiesen, UNDP Regional HIV Practice Team Leader for Asia and the Pacific.

According to JVR Prasada Rao, Director of UNAIDS Regional Support Team, Asia and the Pacific, "Even before the financial crisis, HIV programmes and services for migrants and mobile populations often fell through the cracks in national programmes. Besides, we had seen from the past financial crisis that HIV prevention programmes were first to face budget cutbacks. Issues related to migrants are critical in a region with fast economic growth like Asia. We must strongly advocate with governments and donors not to cut resources on migrant HIV programmes as this will cause serious setbacks to universal access targets and MDG6".

The '97 Asian financial crisis showed that policies to reduce migration, such as limiting migrant work permits or cutting jobs and deporting workers, are not successful in reducing irregular migration. Without access to formal channels of migration, many people on the move seek informal, unsafe channels of movement that puts them in conditions with greater risk and vulnerability to HIV. Also, cuts in HIV government funding risks losing all the achievements made in reducing the spread of the AIDS epidemic on a national scale.

The paper illustrates that governments have stopped issuing work permits, are cracking down on undocumented migrants (Malaysia, Taiwan) and many foreign workers in manufacturing and construction are being laid off (Indonesia, China). Also, in several countries there are

increasing reports of worsening working conditions (in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Malaysia and Singapore).

There are increasing concerns that female migrants who lose their jobs may move into sex work to survive. In Cambodia, for example, 70,000 garment workers, mostly female, have lost their jobs since the crisis began. A recent study by the UN Inter-Agency Project on Human Trafficking has found that among a sample of sex workers, 58% of them entered into sex work in the wake of the financial crisis, and that 19% of these women were former garment sector workers.

“In times of economic downturn, we cannot forget the needs and rights of migrant workers who are such an integral part of so many economies, especially in our region” says Dhannan Sunoto, of the ASEAN Secretariat. “It is critical to ensure that potential migrants are not barred from working abroad based on their HIV positive status, and that migrants working abroad are not deported because of their positive status.”

“In the context of the current economic crisis we have reports of increased human rights violations, and pressure on migrant workers to move from formal to informal employment or to return to their countries of origin. These trends are likely to exacerbate vulnerability to HIV” says Dr Sophia Kisting, Director of the ILO Programme on HIV/AIDS and the world of work. “The ILO is in the process of formulating an international human rights instrument on HIV/AIDS and the world of work. If adopted in 2010, this standard focusing solely on HIV and the world of work will give new impetus to anti-discrimination policies at national and workplace levels”, she adds.

According to Rina, from the Philippines, a positive migrant worker, “Undocumented migrant workers are more vulnerable to a lot of problems and challenges including getting infected with HIV because their rights are not protected.” She continues, “The global recession will affect more and more migrants, and several will become undocumented, moreover, health services for non nationals will be a major challenge. I urge policy makers and practitioners to look into this and ensure that migrants are not further discriminated or marginalized.”

The paper outlines key recommendations for host countries and countries of origin, as they both have an equal responsibility to provide protective policies and programmes. These include:

- Establish protective mechanisms like welfare funds, social insurance schemes and training programmes to help migrants returning home or to relocate on site. Investment to support one migrant or mobile person impacts estimated 3-5 family members in their home countries.
- Translate regional and national strategies for HIV that include migrants and mobile populations into budgets and services that are designed to reach people on the move.
- Maintain prevention programmes and budgets: every \$1 invested in prevention can save up to \$8 in averted treatment costs¹.
- Engage with and support civil society organizations to monitor the health seeking behaviour of migrants so that they do not have to sacrifice treatment for other basic necessities for themselves and their families.

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¹ Aids Commission Report 2008