



THE WATCHDOG

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A critical youth analysis of the political declaration

The AIDS UNGASS is reaching its end, and a new political declaration is about to be adopted in the General Assembly. As many of us already know, the declaration fails to commit to further action that would be necessary to combat HIV/AIDS.

There is good text related to youth in the declaration, such as mentioning of condoms, youth friendly health services, evidence based prevention strategies and women's full enjoyment of human rights. These are all core strategies in fighting HIV/AIDS, and we encourage all to take them home, and advocate for a youth perspective in policy and implementation.

But, the absence of specific language such as comprehensive sexuality education, empowerment of girls, discriminated populations, sexual and reproductive rights and marital rape as one of the forms of sexual violence, leaves the declaration weak and ambiguous. These missing languages have profound impact in the lives of young people and their chances to protect themselves from HIV/AIDS.

Due to the lack of text on comprehensive sexuality education, the declaration is missing one of the most important ways for youth to receive the information and capacities needed to make informed choices. Further, a much stronger language is needed on gender. The declaration we sit with now simplifies gender issues and fails to stress the importance of empowerment of young women and girls, and hence leaves out a key component of prevention in an age of feminization of HIV/AIDS.

Worst, conservative language such as abstinence and fidelity. ethics and cultural values have found their way to the document. These so called ethics and values have the sole purpose of stripping young people of agency and empowerment, by controlling their sexuality. To believe that doing this will prevent HIV/AIDS is, plainly speaking, depressing.

We also believe that the term "vulnerable groups" should be changed to "discriminated populations", because while some populations in society are bearing a heavier burden of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, it does not mean that they are vulnerable in themselves as human beings. The high infection rates among young people (particularly young women), men who have sex with men, sex workers and injecting drug users, should be blamed on the lack of acceptance, support, and respect for their experiences and identities that societies in this world still reproduce. The problem is not the people, it's the discriminatory systems they are forced to either exist within or live outside of.

Coming to New York this week has been a disappointment for many of us. If we mean serious business with combating HIV/AIDS, we need stronger political leadership from member states at this level. Yet, the things that have disappointed us during this last week should not be brought up as a failure in the future, but rather as an inspiration of what happens when everyone are not committing to an issue as serious and critical for this world as HIV/AIDS.

We solemnly swear to keep the fight going.

Progressive Youth Caucus

Progressive Youth Caucus

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UNPLANNED PROTEST

*Martijn Seijsener,
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In the last issue a critique of the negotiation process, in particular the lack of transparency and communication between all parties involved, made the front page of this publication. It spoke of a process that facilitates the "least common denominator" and leaves civil society and others involved with little real power, both financially as politically to confront the grave challenges that lie ahead. It is one thing to express one's criticism and thoughts on paper, where there is time to formulate sentences and think about what message you want to bring across, it is another thing to actually stand up and make your voice be heard. This is what happened to me last night. I found myself in the midst of a protest set up by civil society and launched right after the speech of Noerine Kaleeba.

Yesterday the question was posed: How did it get to this stage? Today a better question would be: How did I get on stage?

It started with my idea of attending the Evening of Remembrance and Hope, an event that was organized and hosted by UNAIDS to commemorate the 25th year of a world living with HIV. This event where world leaders and others from around the globe would speak, was going to have a surprise element.

Little did UNAIDS know that this event would not only be an event where the 25th anniversary of a world living with HIV would be marked, it was to become a stage, a podium where civil society would express their frustrations with issues that had been neglected and deliberately kept out of the declaration by member states. Oblivious of what had been thought-out by civil society I took my place in the audience. The music started, the lights dimmed and the president of the General Assembly took the floor. He was followed by the Secretary General and Richard Gere. The tension within the civil society group grew as Noerine Kaleeba took the floor and sent a strong, clear, and some may argue, harsh message to the delegations, criticizing them for watering down the declaration. As she finished her speech members of civil society then proceed to get up en masse and recite the words: Treatment, Targets, Women & Girls, Harm Reduction and Vulnerable Groups. At that point UN guards asked the protesters to sit down or leave the grounds. All most all of civil society then left the room and where "escorted" out by the UN police. The guards forced the protesters into a corner and started asking for badges. The civil society protesters reacted by gathering around each other and forming a human block. This in combination with the mediation of UNAIDS representatives resulted in all badges being returned. Although it was an uneasy experience I would like to take this opportunity to say that I not only commemorate the 25th year of a world living with HIV, I also commemorate all the activists and others that have been active in the fight against AIDS.

RADIO INTERVIEW WITH BBC WORLD: MUSLIM YOUTH'S CONCERNS ABOUT THE HIGH LEVEL MEETING ON HIV AIDS

*Nino Susanto,
GYCA , Youth Coalition
Indonesia*

Earlier today, I had the privilege to be interviewed by BBC London Radio to give an update on the 2006 High Level Meeting on HIV. The panelists were from three different Muslim countries: Pinar Ikkaracan from Turkey, Dina from Bangladesh and myself, Nino Susanto from Indonesia (Youth Coalition).

Pinar and Dina, both members of the Coalition for Sexual and Bodily Rights in Muslim societies expressed their concern regarding the position of OIC countries on the Declaration, which doesn't reflect - according to them - the civil society's perspective and the best practices regarding HIV/AIDS within the Muslim countries.

I spoke about youth issues in the Muslim countries, particularly youth with different sexual orientations and mentioned the stigma and discrimination that they face in their daily life. Most Muslim youth are denied the right to comprehensive sexual education and left in the dark about their body and sexuality, which highly increases their vulnerability towards HIV infection.

Pinar and Dina noted with concern the worrying rising islamophobia in the world and noted ironically that the only common ground OIC countries and Bush's administration could find is the reactionary statements (abstinence only approach, denial of the right to access comprehensive sexual education etc.) that their delegations have been pushing for since the beginning of the process.

THE LINKAGES BETWEEN SRH AND HIV

*Imane Khachani,
Youth Coalition
Morocco*

In theory, sexual and reproductive health care incorporates prevention, diagnosis and treatment of STIs, including HIV.

However, in practice, SRH programs fail to incorporate HIV, which is often addressed separately.

WHY LINKING SRH TO HIV?

It is a matter of fact that the large majority of HIV infections is transmitted through unprotected sexual intercourse and is often associated with pregnancy, childbirth and breastfeeding.

Also, the presence of STIs highly increases the risk of HIV transmission, people with STIs being 4 times more likely to get infected with HIV.

Moreover, poverty, gender inequality and social marginalization are common roots to HIV epidemic spread and to poor sexual and reproductive health and therefore, many means to address sexual and reproductive health issues are also able to respond to HIV prevention, treatment and care.

HOW?

Incorporating a comprehensive package including HIV education, testing, treatment and care into SRH programs would:

- Encourage information sharing and behavior change
- Promote condom use for dual protection HIV/STIs and protection from unwanted pregnancies
- Improve the quality of care provided in terms of counseling and confidentiality and strengthen health care providers' capacities in terms of STIs management (reducing the risk of HIV infection)\increase the cost effectiveness of SRH services and reduce stigma and discrimination.

BARRIERS?

Religious and political barriers, as well as limited resources make it difficult, especially for developing countries to integrate a comprehensive HIV package including education, diagnosis, treatment and care to SRH services.

LA PARTICIPACIÓN DE LA JUVENTUD LATINOAMERICANA EN UNGASS+5

*Ricardo Baruch Domínguez,
GYCA Focal Point Latin America
Mexico*

Los países latinoamericanos agrupados casi en su totalidad en el grupo de Rio han sido de los más activos en la negociaciones para incluir el marco integral de la salud y los derechos sexuales y reproductivos en la nueva declaración; algunos y algunas jóvenes de dicha región han estado participando en sus respectivas delegaciones para incluir las prioridades que los temas de juventud representan para América Latina y el Caribe así como también sobre las demás necesidades específicas de la región.

La presencia de gente joven de Argentina, Chile, Ecuador, Paraguay, Bolivia, Brasil, Perú, Panamá, Venezuela y México se dio en los eventos previos a UNGASS organizados por la Youth Coalition como es el caso del Youth Caucus y el otro organizado por la GYCA y Advocates for Youth cuyo objetivo fue fortalecer habilidades y conocimientos para poder tener una mayor influencia en las negociaciones en la sede de las Naciones Unidas. El VIH/SIDA en América Latina ha dejado de ser prioridad para los financiamientos a nivel internacional debido a que la pandemia está creciendo más lentamente que en otras regiones -según las estadísticas- y que hay un crecimiento económico más estable -en teoría-, sin embargo es necesario reconocer que los esfuerzos para la prevención, atención y mitigación del daño no han sido suficientes y que más de la mitad de las nuevas infecciones se están dando entre personas de 15 a 24 años.

Las misiones de algunos países se han opuesto a reconocer la importancia de la inclusión de los y las jóvenes como grupo afectado y como grupo que puede participar para contrarrestar los efectos de la pandemia de VIH/SIDA; así mismo, no ha habido una respuesta progresista como la que se esperaba para apoyar el lenguaje relacionado a grupos vulnerables tales como hombres que tienen sexo con hombres y los y las trabajadoras del sexo que son en quienes la epidemia se encuentra concentrada en nuestra región.

Sin duda es un avance que haya eventos paralelos con la participación de juventud latina pero más importante sería impulsar el involucramiento en las delegaciones de los países, en primer lugar por ser sociedad civil y en segundo lugar por ser jóvenes.

"THE SOLUTION TO HIV & AIDS EPIDEMIC LIES WITH OVER 3 BILLION YOUNG PEOPLE"

*Mayowa Joel,
Treatment Action Movement
Nigeria*

The pre-UNGASS+5 2006 youth summit held on Monday and Tuesday, May 29 and 30 is significant in the history of UNGASS.

"Having the youth caucus as part of the UNGASS+5 on HIV & AIDS is an improvement over the past" - Dr. Thoraya Obaid - Executive Director, UNFPA.

The youth summit was organized by Advocates for Youth and Global Youth Coalition on AIDS with support from United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). The summit provided the platform for almost sixty (60) youth leaders from various countries to learn, network and strategize on how to ensure that youth issues are properly incorporated into the Political Declaration that will emerge from the UNGASS.

The goal of the summit is to empower the youth leaders attending the 2006 AIDS review to inform, educate and influence government with regard to funding, programmes and/ or policies for youth and HIV/AIDS.

Sessions at the youth summit were facilitated by experts, researchers, youth leaders and adult allies. Some of the sessions include:

- Overview of UN System - Sarah Ganter, UNFPA
- Responding to the Global AIDS Epidemic: The UN System - Mary Otieno, UNFPA
- Review of UNGASS 2001 - Nicole Chetam, Advocates for Youth
- The Effectiveness of interventions to achieve the Global Goals on HIV/AIDS among young people in low and middle-income countries - Jane Fergusson, WHO
- Unite for Children, Unite Against AIDS: Moving Forward - HIV Prevention Programming with an for adolescents - UNICEF
- Lobbying UN Missions - Zonny Woods, IWHC and Shannon Kowalski, FCI
- Media and how to build your messages - Victor Bernhardt (YC) and Edford Mutuna (AFRiYAN/GYCA)

The highpoints at the youth summit were the interactive sessions the youth leaders had with major stakeholders working on preventing and mitigating the impact of HIV/AIDS among young people. These include Dr. Thoraya Obaid - Executive Director, UNFPA; Dr. Peter Piot - Executive Director, UNAIDS; Dr. Fama Ba - Director, African Division, UNFPA and James Wagoner - President, Advocates for Youth.

In their various presentations and comments, they reaffirm their conviction that young people are the solution to the HIV/AIDS epidemic facing the world. They inspired the youth leaders to rise up to the challenges and make the world free of HIV/AIDS.

"We need to make sure that the goal of the world is that no young person is getting infected with HIV" - Dr. Peter Piot, UNAIDS

"Whatever decision you take, you have to make sure it is because you feel comfortable with it" - Dr. Thoraya Obaid, UNFPA

"If comprehensive information doesn't empower, then ignorance won't" - James Wagoner - Advocates for Youth.

Participants at the youth summit were highly inspired by the words of encouragement by the leaders and are also working to present the youth position paper to the world leaders attending the UNGASS. You can access other relevant information and interviews from the UNGASS on www.rhrealitycheck.org

PANEL 5: OVERCOMING STIGMA AND DISCRIMINATION AND CHANGING THE WAY SOCIETIES RESPOND TO PEOPLE LIVING WITH HIV/AIDS

*Claudia Ahumada,
Youth Coalition
Chile*

Good morning mister chairman, fellow delegates and participants. I am here today, as a member of the Youth Coalition, to speak about the need and ways in which we can and must overcome stigma and discrimination surrounding HIV/AIDS

HIV/AIDS has been around for decades now, and along with the alarming growth of the pandemic, we face the everlasting stigma and discrimination surrounding HIV/AIDS, more so in the case of people who are HIV positive. Though the declaration of commitment on HIV/AIDS adopted on 2001 called for measures to eliminate all forms of discrimination, these measures have clearly not been enough and in many cases, have not even been implemented.

At this stage, the growing rates of HIV are staggering, and of the new infections, youth comprise 50%. It is obvious that HIV/AIDS will not disappear on its own. It is just as evident that what governments are doing to address the pandemic is not even close to sufficient. Governments have spent the last months, and even more intensely the last days negotiating a declaration in HIV/AIDS. Now, correct me if I am wrong, but didn't we already do that in 2001? Additionally, is not true that the declaration included a series of commitments, measures to be taken, indicators and timelines, related specifically to stigma and discrimination?

It is disappointing that we are now expected to erase this from our memories and act practically as if we are starting for scratch. Why not just say it? Let's be honest: we have not done enough to overcome stigma and discrimination, nor to change the way societies respond to people living with HIV/AIDS.

Let's not try to reinvent the wheel here, in a three day conference. The measures that have to be taken are clear and have proven to be effective. We need and furthermore, we have the right to comprehensive sexuality education, youth friendly health and social services, that safeguard all people, included youth's right to confidentiality, privacy and informed consent.

You may well ask what this has to do with overcoming stigma and discrimination. In this regard, it is essential to recognize that stigma and discrimination surrounding HIV/AIDS is to a great extent due to the misinformation and myths that surround it. By having comprehensive sexuality education and universal access to information and services, people will be able to become aware not only about how to prevent HIV/AIDS, but also about the modes of infection, which will largely contribute to demystify the conception that people living with HIV/AIDS are somehow a threat to society or wrong doers. They aren't a threat; it is HIV/AIDS and more concretely it is the lack of effective measures that have been taken to stop the pandemic as well as the unfounded discrimination and stigma that goes along with it. This discrimination leads to isolation, fear and fractured societies. Even more so, it leads to an increase in HIV/AIDS.

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This is not something to keep quiet about. Governments, in full collaboration with civil society and youth, must take concrete measures to eliminate the stigma and discrimination surrounding HIV/AIDS and people infected and affected by it.

Some may say that these measures necessarily vary from place to place, and that may well be true. But, let's not deceive ourselves: cultural differences are no excuse and certainly do not justify stigma and discrimination. Just as human rights, including sexual and reproductive rights, are universal, there are also a series of basic measures to overcome stigma and discrimination that must be universal.

In this sense, governments have already committed in the 2001 declaration to enforce legislation, regulations and other measures to stop discrimination against people living with HIV/AIDS and vulnerable groups; ensure full human rights to all people, including access to education, inheritance, employment, health care, social services, prevention, support, treatment, information, legal protection, privacy and confidentiality; develop strategies to combat stigma and social exclusion; implement strategies that: promote the advancement of women and complete human rights; promote shared responsibility of men and women to ensure safe sex; empower women to protect themselves from HIV infection, including by providing prevention and health information; and implement strategies eliminating all forms of discrimination and violence against women and girls, including harmful traditional practices, abuse, rape, sexual violence, battering and trafficking.

These are not new measures or new demands; we are simply asking that governments live up to their commitments. Needless to say that the timelines set for accomplishing these measures have all passed and we are far from having accomplished them.

In addition, the severe discrimination surrounding HIV/AIDS shows that the adoption of innovative measures is of the essence. Specifically, we need the legislation and policies regarding HIV/AIDS to not only be adopted, but actually respected and enforced. We need education and campaigns that educate people about the rights of people living with HIV/AIDS, including universal access as a basic necessity, not an option or something to debate. We need youth in all countries to be involved in the planning, monitoring and evaluation of sexual and reproductive rights services and information, including HIV/AIDS. Declarations are not enough, they do not save lives. Therefore we need concrete measures to end stigma and discrimination surrounding HIV/AIDS. It is not enough to say that "we will do something". This is not just something else to tick off our agendas, as if the meeting ends, the Declaration is completed, and all is done. We need governments, in collaboration with youth and civil society to go back to their countries and adopt these measures. In addition, we need international institutions, including the United Nations, to have HIV/AIDS on the top of their agenda. In summary, we need to save lives.

Youth activists, women's organizations, HIV/AIDS organizations and other civil society groups present at UNGASS, as well as those following the process around the world, are serious and fully committed to working to eliminate the stigma and discrimination surrounding HIV/AIDS. We hope that the outcome of this general assembly will show that governments are serious too.