

Shaping health globally – from the German Global Health Strategy to shared commitment: an online event series of the BMG and the GHHG

Health Promotion and Disease Prevention: Lessons Learned from Cooperation in the HIV/AIDS Epidemic

Online-Event:	Health Promotion and Disease Prevention: Lessons Learned from Cooperation in the HIV/AIDS Epidemic
Series:	BMG and GHHG Discussion Series: Shaping health globally – from the German Global Health Strategy to shared commitment
Date:	8 July 2021, at 2-3.30 PM (CET)
Moderator:	Dr Christoph Benn (Joep Lange Institute).
Speakers:	Ellen MC. Mubanga (National AIDS Council, Zambia) Binod Mahanty (Federal Ministry of Health, BMG) Alexander Freese (Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, BMZ) Peter Wiessner (Action against AIDS Germany)

Click here for the [short video](#) and the [complete video](#) of the event!

The event highlighted Germany's commitment to Global Health as expressed in the [German Strategy on Global Health](#)

Overview

Although Covid-19 is overwhelmingly attracting the world's attention, other infectious diseases should not be forgotten. For instance, more than 1.7 million official HIV-infections are registered per year. Health systems need to be strengthened and it has become very clear, that HIV prevention, besides treatment, is a topic of high relevance in reaching the SDG 3 and the goals of the Global Action Plan to end this ongoing pandemic.

Some of the challenges encountered in HIV prevention are due to the structural barriers faced by key populations and civil society in numerous countries. A framing towards a more community-centered health system is one approach to turn the current situation into an opportunity.

Moreover, countries, such as Zambia, need continuity and reliability as well as a scaling-up in its programs to have effective tools in the HIV response. Equal access to HIV treatment is not only here but elsewhere another crucial factor in effectively targeting HIV/AIDS.

Some priorities for the German government include a people-centered health approach and the strengthening of health systems and communities through the support of partners like the Global Fund, who implements programs at all levels, focusing on the support of education and health in an interface, e.g., in the CSE sector. Those partnerships need to be made possible through the government and coordination and more common approaches can be perfected by the organizations.

Take home messages:

Christoph Benn complimented the organizers for putting the topic of HIV prevention high on the agenda despite the overwhelming interest for Covid-19, as “it is easily forgotten that the first major pandemic after WW2 has been HIV – and it is far from being over”. Huge progress has been made when it comes to the speed of identifying a virus, producing reliable tests, and developing a vaccine during the Covid-19 pandemic. Yet, despite the existence of a highly effective treatment for HIV, infections are still increasing worldwide, which highlights the importance of focusing on prevention rather than prominently on treatment.

Ellen M.C. Mubanga provided insights from Zambia, pointing out that the country missed “the momentum to ensure that prevention programs are activated and good in results”. Instead, the focus was set on treatment programs and biomedical factors. In addition, several factors are hindering effective HIV prevention, including a financial reduction towards civil society organizations who are the key in implementing HIV prevention programs. Moreover, the belief system is partly in contradiction to the prevention interventions and many infected people are facing stigma and discrimination. The situation in countries like Zambia is a decisive factor in shaping the HIV response of the German government since “HIV is one of the leading causes for death when we look at infectious diseases”. As Alexander Freese put it, that is why “it is really a priority for us, for the German government and also internationally to continue the fight”.

The health promotion and disease prevention work of the German Ministry of Health is implemented by the Federal Centre for Health Education (BZgA) and through NGOs to reach key and vulnerable populations. Behavioral, biomedical, and structural aspects are considered in this approach. A key actor of implementation partnerships at the international level is the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. UNAIDS and other UN organization also play a major role. Freese emphasized a change towards more prevention in general and an increase in addressing human rights barriers in the context of the HIV response. German civil society is involved in international processes through health working groups at the G7 and G20 meetings and board meetings of the organizations, where civil society provides input.

UNAIDS represents an example of a successful partnership, Binod Mahanty clarified, “because it coordinates the global HIV response of the 11 co-sponsors and also supports countries in the implementation. That is a huge advantage of UNAIDS, including the inclusive governing structure which includes civil society and people affected and which brings a lot of reality to the board meetings”. Fortunately, the investments of the new UNAIDS strategy for combination prevention put equal weight on prevention and treatment.

The Covid-19 pandemic has also had a significant impact on HIV prevention in Zambia. According to Mubanga, “civil societies’ involvement cannot be overemphasized. They are key because we still need them to connect to the communities and if we are going to make any relevant breakthrough in prevention, we need them involved”. Currently, meetings cannot take place and technology is rarely available. Mahanty also pointed out that “if we do not deliberately or intentionally put in effort to strengthen health system in terms of HIV prevention and treatment, we are likely – from a Zambian perspective – to lose the gains that we have made so far”.

The key learning from the HIV pandemic according to Wiessner is: “do no harm”. The HIV pandemic is accompanied by panic and heated media debates leading to stigma, and discrimination. As much as key populations need to be sheltered, equal access to treatment and vaccines needs to be guaranteed. For this, the German government has approved supplementary budgets to ACT-A and COVAX. It is a strategy of the German government to support corporations and partnerships that allow overcoming structural barriers and strengthening civil societies as well as key populations. As Freese highlights: “It is really the partnership that can hopefully make a difference”.