

The UK announces £6 billion to be spent on health - but questions arise on what this means for AIDS funding

On Monday 2nd June, the UK's Department for International Development launched its strategy for tackling HIV and AIDS and Achieving Universal Access to HIV/AIDS treatment, prevention, care and support. The strategy outlined a plan to allocate £6 billion between 2008-2015 to invest in the health systems and services required to meet the goal of 'universal access'.

Whilst welcoming the significant scaling up of investment in health by the UK Government accompanying the launch of this strategy, UK civil society organisations are also concerned that the new strategy for achieving universal access includes few indications on how these funds will be disbursed and how much of these funds will be allocated specifically to addressing HIV and AIDS, particularly amongst the most vulnerable communities.

Launching the UK Government's AIDS Strategy on 2nd June, Douglas Alexander, Secretary of State for Development, underlined the UK Government's ongoing leadership in the global effort to achieve universal access to HIV treatment, prevention, care and support and announced that DFID will spend £6 billion on health systems and services in developing countries until 2015. This comes in addition to £1 billion allocated by DFID to the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, TB and Malaria in 2007.

DFID's strategy for 'Achieving Universal Access' commits the UK to a number of specific actions including:

- Working with others to bring down the cost of treatment to enable more people to access life saving drugs;
- Increasing the coverage of services for injecting drug users;
- Meeting the needs of orphans and vulnerable children, including those affected by AIDS;
- Preventing the transmission of HIV from mothers to their children; and increasing the availability of family planning, including male and female condoms;
- Spending over £200 million to support social protection programmes over the next 3 years; and
- Increasing by at least 50% funding for research and development of AIDS vaccines and microbicides.

UK civil society, whilst welcoming the commitment by DFID to increase expenditure on health by £6 billion over the next seven years are, however, concerned that a lack of clarity and transparency on how these funds will be delivered may result in an overall reduction in the amount of money spent on HIV and AIDS specific interventions. An issue of particular concern is in ensuring this money will support the most marginalised and vulnerable groups, that are often unable to access mainstream health services, to protect themselves and receive treatment of HIV infection.

Alvaro Bermejo, Executive Director of the International HIV/AIDS Alliance, illustrated these concerns well when he said: *"If the funding does not reach those living with or at risk of HIV we will find that the gains made in the last decade will be undone"*

The UK Government professes to be one of the leading donor agencies in supporting the HIV and AIDS response. Do you think DFID's new strategy on Achieving Universal Access will allow the UK Government to maintain this leadership?