HOW TO BUILD A CONSORTIUM OF DIFFERENT KEY COMMUNITIES FOR EFFECTIVE ADVOCACY TO ENSURE SUSTAINABLE FUNDING OF THE HIV RESPONSE

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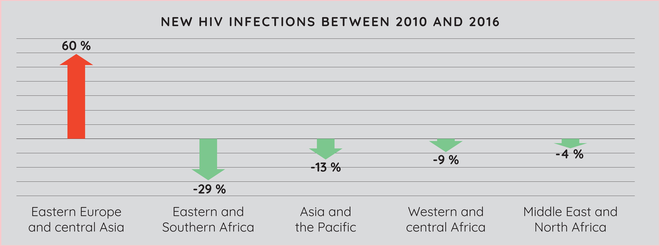
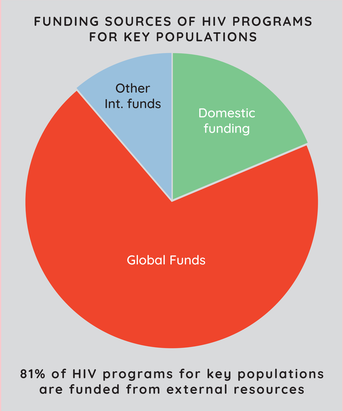
BACKGROUND

The fastest growing HIV epidemic in the world continues to be in Eastern Europe and Central Asia (EECA). New HIV infections in the region have increased by over 60% since 2010.



Support to HIV programs for key populations in the EECA is almost exclusively dependent on international funding which is decreasing.



Key populations are excluded from the continuum of HIV care because of stigma and discrimination as well as from legal, institutional and social barriers. They are rarely engaged in state budget monitoring and advocacy around services along the HIV continuum of care.

ACTIVITIES

3 regional community networks of PWUD, MSM and PLHIV – the Eurasian Harm Reduction Association, the Eurasian Coalition on Male Health, and the Eastern Europe & Central Asia Union of PLWH - came together with complimentary capacities to establish the Eurasian Regional Consortium to implement the project, "Money Can Buy Health If You Budget For It", to respond to the shared challenges of insufficient and unsustainable funding of the HIV response for inadequately served populations (ISP's) and people living with HIV (PLWH).

The main goal of the Eurasian Regional Consortium is to build the capacity of community-based organizations of key populations; to foster exchange and partnership between different ISP groups in budget advocacy and HIV resource accountability; and to help them advocate for national and municipal budget resources to be allocated to the continuum of HIV care for all ISP's in Eastern Europe and Central Asia.

The Eurasian Regional Consortium has been encouraged and supported with small grants and technical assistance and through the active work of the National Consortia of PWUD, MSM and PLHIV in Armenia, Estonia and Kyrgyzstan to jointly advocate for their respective governments to invest in services along the HIV continuum of care.

As an outcome, PWUD, MSM and PLHIV in Armenia, Estonia and Kyrgyzstan conducted community-led assessments of access and quality of HIV services for ISP's. As a result of the assessments, the needs of ISP were identified and priority HIV services were then defined followed by the development and implementation of joint advocacy action plans in all 3 countries.

Here are some of the lessons learned based on the experience of the Eurasian Regional Consortium and the National consortia in Armenia, Estonia and Kyrgyzstan.

COOPERATION AND COORDINATION WITHIN CONSORTIA

NATIONAL LEVEL

CHALLENGES	WHAT HELPS	HOW TO IMPROVE
Prejudice, stigma and discrimination can lead to policies and practices that make some communities vulnerable to HIV and block their access to needed services; these factors can also interfere with the ability of different groups to cooperate together. Lack of mechanisms for improving interaction with each other. If groups have not systematized their cooperation or partnership, they may miss many opportunities in which they can support each other or pool resources or amplify the voice of each other.	Intersectionality. Mobilization of people who - in one way or another – pertain to more than one community can help spread understanding and reduce prejudice and stigma between groups. Such people can be invited to help build bridges between the representatives of different communities that they represent. Honesty, transparency and regular, strategic communication. When groups actively share information about their goals, activities, and resources, trust can be built and opportunities can be identified to be mutually supportive. Communication skills. Cooperation takes not only the sharing of information, but the skills to listen carefully to partners and to communicate in a way that is respectful and helps the speaker to be understood. Understanding each other. For cooperation, groups must understand each other's mission, understand what problems each face, and understand where their missions overlap. They must have a good understanding of the problems each group faces. They must have a good understanding of what resources (including funds, skills, knowledge, partners) each can contribute to the partnership. They must also have a good understanding of what weaknesses each group might have that may need to be addressed or compensated for.	Having a common understanding of why a partnership is beneficial. Building mutual understanding of the needs and strengths of each other. Developing and agreeing on working principles (MoU). Improving communication: • Ensuring open, transparent and professional communication; • Ensuring active, multi-directional communication; • Reaching out to communities broadly; • Agreeing on communication roles and responsibilities; • Using appropriate, simple, accurate and respectful language; • Identifying appropriate and effective means of communication; and, • Undertaking regular and ongoing communication.

THE FUNDING ENVIRONMENT FOR ADVOCACY

CHALLENGES	WHAT HELPS	HOW TO IMPROVE
Inadequate level of funding and the lack of international political commitment for making policy reform feasible in the region.	Consortium-based cooperation between the ISP networks has become common sense in the region. This has been implemented at many different levels, starting from municipal to regional (EECA) cooperation of ISP networks.	

REGIONAL LEVEL

All partners found themselves at different levels of development and facing organisational challenges.	During crisis situations, consortium members have complemented each other in joint activities carried out under the Eurasian Regional Consortium. Consortium members proved flexible enough to reflect on the needs arising from the rapidly changing operational environments.	
Coordinating the program between the three organizations by rotating the leadership role from member-to-member consumes considerable resources.	This model enables the Consortium to engage with each other's topics to better understand the needs of each other. This learning and unique sharing experience provides for joint development. Among key lessons learned from the consortium-building are the following: • There is a need for regular (at least once per year) face-to-face meetings of the consortium leadership for reviewing and re-planning; • Flexibility of the project provides opportunities to fill capacity and skills gaps. Additional budget advocacy trainings, guidance on cooperation methods, building facilitator skills – these are examples of new activities developed by the consortium based on emergency needs and similar challenges; • Joint participation in national advocacy events (such as the Kyrgyz National AIDS Conference, or the Estonian EC advocacy meeting on sustainable funding) – a good way to share approaches and be more effective in advocacy; and, • There should be opportunities to bring other community networks on board for joint advocacy activities.	

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ehra eurasian harm reduction association

ECOM

ROBERT CARR FUND for civil society networks

ECUO East Europe & Central Asia Union of PLWH