

We Demand the Implementation of the Turkey HIV/AIDS Control Program and the Organization of the Evaluation Meetings Specified in the National Action Plan

HIV/AIDS is a Global Public Health Issue

According to UNAIDS (the Joint United Nations Program on HIV/AIDS) data, there were around 37 million people living with HIV in 2020, 53% of whom were women. Around 1.5 million new infections occur each year, and about a quarter of people living with HIV could not access treatment in 2020. Between the first reported case of HIV in 1985 and November 2021, 31.000 people were diagnosed with HIV in Turkey. With one-third of all diagnoses having occurred in the last three years, it is possible to argue that an effective response to the HIV epidemic has not yet been established in our country. Understanding the seriousness of the situation and developing the necessary response is only possible with an effective monitoring and evaluation program. Among the people diagnosed with HIV in 2021, only 38% of cases were reported to have any information on possible routes of transmission, which also points out to lack of surveillance data in the country.

HIV is not only an infection that requires biomedical attention, but it also exposes inequalities, violations of rights and discrimination in social life and public services, including access to health. The global targets have been developed by UNAIDS to prevent the spread of HIV, the decrease in the welfare of those living with HIV, and the human rights violations they face.

Turkey's Response to HIV and AIDS: Turkish HIV/AIDS Control Program

In line with the global targets the “Turkey HIV/AIDS Control Program” was developed to create a roadmap for HIV and AIDS services in our country. Three main objectives have been determined in the Turkey HIV/AIDS Control Program:

- To reduce the number of new HIV and AIDS cases and deaths related to the infection.
- To improve the capacity of health services for HIV and AIDS.
- To prevent discrimination and privacy violations against individuals living with HIV.

The program consists of goals and activities to be carried out towards these goals. The program also includes an Action Plan to be implemented between 2019-2024. With the responsibilities of institutions and organisations in the foreseen activities clearly specified, the action plan provides clear guidance on achieving the global targets and country-specific goals, stipulates the duration of the activities and determines the indicators for monitoring the activities.

The program states that the Ministry of Health is responsible for the management of the program while the Department of Communicable Diseases within the General Directorate of Public Health is responsible for the implementation. The activities described in the Action Plan are recommended to be carried out by the public offices and organisations with the involvement of other stakeholders including non-governmental organisations (NGOs). The program also mentions monitoring and evaluation meetings which will be organised by the secretariat as emphasized in the implementation section of the program.

However, although the program was launched in 2019, no monitoring and evaluation meeting involving all stakeholders has been conducted by the Ministry of Health, and the public has not been informed about this progress. This makes it difficult to understand how much of the goals set in the “control” program have been achieved to date. Furthermore, it prevents evaluating the effectiveness of the program, as well as the development and improvement of the related policies and services.

To Ensure Effectiveness, the Control Program Must Be Monitored and Evaluated During the Implementation

Although there is increasing evidence that HIV prevention, treatment and care services have significant benefits for communities, gathering reliable evidence is an urgent and necessary requirement to understand whether these services are accessible and effective. In this regard, the program states that the HIV/AIDS surveillance data plays an important role in: demonstrating the need for HIV/AIDS services, resource allocation, evaluation of prevention and HIV-care services, identifying key populations affected by the local epidemic, decreasing the number of new infections and preventing the development of AIDS. Therefore, the program considers updating and strengthening the surveillance system essential. It also recommends conducting second-generation surveillance that will provide bio-behavioural data, population estimates on people living with HIV, key and vulnerable groups which are essential for good service planning and delivery.

With the current implementation of the program, HIV surveillance remains poor in Turkey with little to no data reported on the experiences and needs of people and communities living with and affected by HIV in society; therefore, the current epidemiological state and patterns cannot be understood clearly. However, the UNAIDS 95-95-95 targets are calling for 95% of all people living with HIV to know their HIV status, 95% of all people with diagnosed HIV infection to receive sustained antiretroviral therapy, and 95% of all people receiving antiretroviral therapy to have viral suppression by 2025. These targets also emphasize the scientific fact that HIV transmission is not possible after viral suppression, also known as Undetectable = Untransmittable (U = U), and recommend governments improve their HIV services and reporting in line with these targets.

In other words, as long as those living with HIV are not diagnosed, the improvements in clinical treatment options will not fully pay off, HIV transmission in the country will accelerate and more people will continue to be diagnosed every year. To understand the effectiveness of the program in the current social and structural context and improving the delivery of services is only possible with effective monitoring and evaluation. Otherwise, problems experienced during the implementation phase will inevitably reduce the effectiveness of the program.

Recommendations

- Non-governmental organizations that took responsibility for the implementation of the Turkey HIV/AIDS Control Program should be enabled to fulfil their duties, and the monitoring and evaluation meetings foreseen should be organized by the General Directorate of Public Health, Communicable Diseases Department, with the inclusion of non-governmental organizations.
- A special monitoring and evaluation system for this program should be developed in collaboration with non-governmental organizations for the implementation of the program indicators determined in the monitoring columns of the Action Plan.
- In addition to enabling the evaluation of UNAIDS and country targets, the Program “Demonstrates the need for HIV/AIDS intervention programs; allocating resources during planning; to monitor the effectiveness of prevention and care services and intervention strategies; identify population groups affected by the epidemic within the country to target interventions; bio-behavioral studies and secondary surveillance studies, which are stated to have important areas of use in guiding studies on risk factors for the spread of the virus and progression to AIDS, should be supported and conducted.
- With the findings of the monitoring and evaluation process, the Control Program should be updated for the next term according to the specific needs of each HIV-affected group within the country and the current conjuncture.
- Monitoring and reporting of the HIV epidemic in the country should be carried out in line with UNAIDS 95-95-95 targets. The progress in reaching the ultimate goal of achieving viral suppression among 85% of those living with HIV should be reported separately for each key population in the country.

