Adolescents slipping through the cracks when it comes to HIV

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Ahead of World AIDS Day on 1 December, the International HIV/AIDS Alliance is warning of the urgent need to prioritise HIV and sexual and reproductive health services for adolescents, particularly in the global south where they are slipping through the cracks when it comes to healthcare.

There are an estimated 2.1 million adolescents living with HIV, with more than 80% of them living in sub-Saharan Africa. Many don't know their HIV status.

According to Kate Iorpenda, the Alliance's Senior Advisor on HIV and Children: "Adolescents are the missing link when it comes to HIV services. Only by ensuring they are getting testing and treatment and that they have access to services tailored to individual needs and preferences will we have a chance of defeating AIDS.

"For those who do access treatment, they face many challenges not least a lifetime of drug therapy and issues of disclosure to family, partners and friends. In particular we need to ensure that the needs of the most vulnerable young people are catered for without stigma or judgment."

Increasing evidence highlights that HIV testing rates among adolescents remain low and that those who are diagnosed HIV positive often need more support than adults to adhere to treatment and stay in care. Many face considerable difficulties in transitioning from paediatric to adult care facilities, with adolescents being lost to follow-up in the process.

The International HIV/AIDS Alliance, together with a consortium of international and national non governmental organisations, is currently spearheading an ambitious three year country programme – Link Up - which aims to improve the sexual and reproductive health and rights of more than a million young people aged 24 and under who are living with and affected by HIV in Ethiopia, Bangladesh, Burundi, Myanmar and Uganda

In Burundi, where more than half of the population is under 17, Link Up is focusing on young people living with HIV, young men who have sex with men and young women who sell sex and aims to reach 175,000 young people and adolescents with tailored HIV and sexual and reproductive health services that reflect their specific circumstances.

Earlier this year, community organisation RNJ+ launched a new youth centre in Bujumbura offering services including counselling and testing to support these vulnerable groups to get better education on HIV, sexual health and contraception. It is the first youth-led centre of its kind in Burundi, providing a safe space in a conservative and religious society.

RNJ+ member Pacifique, now 20, was born with HIV but didn't find out his status until he was ten years old. "My mum refused to disclose my status to me. She told me I had a heart problem but that I would get better. When I first found out, I thought I was someone who won't live for very long. I thought I couldn't even get married, I was just here waiting for my death," he said.

Initially bullied at school for his HIV status, Pacifique can be himself at the youth centre. "RNJ+ is my second family. It's where I can meet young people who share the same views, who have the same way of seeing the world, and they're the ones who support me."

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For media information, high res images, case studies or interviews, please contact: Ann Noon, Media Manager, International HIV/AIDS Alliance, +44 (0)1273 718949 or + 44 (0)7590 358391 or email anoon@aidsalliance.org

Notes to editors:

• Last year the International HIV/AIDS Alliance, through the work of its national partners, is estimated to have reached more than half a million adolescents with sexual and reproductive health and other HIV services, and is set to reach even more through the Link Up project which aims to reach more than one million young people across five countries in Africa and Asia by 2016.

• The six international agencies involved in Link Up: Better sexual and reproductive health and rights for young people affected by HIV are ATHENA Network, The Global Youth Coalition on HIV/AIDS (GYCA), the International HIV/AIDS Alliance, Marie Stopes International, Population Council and STOP AIDS NOW!

• The national organisations involved in Link Up are ABS (Burundi), Alliance Myanmar (Myanmar), Community Health Alliance (Uganda), HASAB (Bangladesh) and OSSA (Ethiopia) and their implementing partners.

• The three year programme is funded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the government of the Netherlands (BUZA) through its sexual and reproductive health and rights fund.

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