

APLHIV: A progressive voice in Pakistan

The HIV-epidemic in Pakistan is centralised and concentrated. HIV mainly affects people who inject drugs. In a country where drug use is widespread but also a huge taboo and where sexuality is not always easily discussed, the Pakistani network for people living with HIV and associated key populations (APLHIV) makes itself heard.

Drug users in Pakistan have rights!

Under the umbrella of The Association of People Living with HIV (APLHIV), people who use drugs (PWUD) have united themselves in a semi-independent network called Drug User's Network (DUNE).

Mainline supports DUNE

DUNE documents what goes on in the lives of PWUD in Pakistan and compiles evidence-based advocacy messages. This led to the publication of an excellent report in 2014: [National Study on Access of Drug Users to Treatment and Fundamental Human Rights](#)

From this research, a series of trainings and seminars followed, a guide to create awareness among people who use drugs was drafted and information, education and communication (IEC) materials were developed.

Interesting booklets

The booklet 'Rights of Drug Users in Pakistan' is particularly interesting. Information is provided about drug use in Pakistan, legislation (also including religious laws) and the universal human rights we all have.

A second booklet highlights the risk for Hepatitis C (HCV) and explains how to prevent infections, recognise symptoms and manage HCV and co-infections.

Islamabad visit

Mainliners Nick Veldwijk and Machteld Busz received a warm welcome at the APLHIV office in November 2016. During the visit, the need for continuous advocacy for drug users' rights in Pakistan became clear once more.

A snapshot of the dark facts:

- Over 37% of HIV prevalence is among people who inject drugs.
- Approximately 94,5% of HIV positive people with an injecting drug use background are co-infected with HCV.
- HCV treatment is almost inaccessible due to extremely high prices.

- There is no opioid substitution treatment (OST) available in Pakistan. Most of the active drug users are denied access to HIV medication as service delivery providers assume that drug users cannot be adherent to HIV medication. [An innovative programme](#) however, shows that this is not the case.
- Only those HIV positive people with a CD4 count below 500 are eligible for treatment – with national guidelines expected to be updated to the WHO requirements (universal access for all HIV+ people) only next year.
- No strategy is in place to prevent the spread of HIV to the general population.
- Violation of human rights of PWUD is a normal phenomenon. Less than 5% of the PWUD community know and understand their rights.
- Harassment by law enforcing agencies is a big hurdle in accessing the available services.

More information about drug use, HIV, HCV and human rights of people who inject drugs can be found on the [APLHIV website](#)

2017 plans and collaboration with ITPC

Mainline will continue to work with APLHIV and DUNE in 2017 as part of our innovation agenda within Bridging the Gaps 2. Activities vary between raising awareness on HCV, advocating for meaningful involvement in decision making, advocacy for increased harm reduction funding and OST and recording of human rights violation via the 24/7 helpline.

An interesting joint activity for 2017 was kick-started in November. Under the Bridging the Gaps programme [ITPC](#), Mainline, APLHIV and Nai Zindagi initiated a participatory research. The ultimate goal of the research is to find the barriers that prevent access for those who use drugs who are diagnosed with HIV to ARVs. Furthermore, evidence will be collected on human rights violations of drug users regarding access to public health services. A group of Nai Zindagi and APLHIV staff designed the research during the training ITPC had organised. The study was implemented in 2017 and will be followed by a clear advocacy agenda.

Word of thanks

Mainline thanks APLHIV and Nai Zindagi for the warm welcome and great learning experience. We hope for a fruitful new year full of innovations and joint work.

Mainline also thanks the Dutch embassy - in particular Ambassador Jeannette Seppen - for the support given for our work.