

THE EAST AFRICAN COMMUNITY



The East African Community HIV and AIDS Programme

1. Introduction

The East African Community (EAC) is the regional intergovernmental organization of the Republic of Kenya, Republic of Rwanda, Republic of Burundi, the United Republic of Tanzania, and Republic of Uganda, with its headquarters in Arusha, United Republic of Tanzania (www.eac.int). In article 118 of the EAC Treaty, the Partner States undertake to co-operate in health, cultural, sports and social welfare activities within the Community; and recognises that the five (5) Partner States are affected by similar infectious disease including the Human Immunodeficiency Virus/Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (HIV and AIDS), among others.

The establishment of the EAC Common Market and Customs Union will potentially increase the frequency of population movements across the borders of the five countries and consequently posing a great risk of spreading HIV from one country to another. The response to such a regional epidemiological problem is complex and involves the joint efforts of national, regional and international agencies and stakeholders. An efficient and quick flow of information as well as harmonisation of the HIV and AIDS response across the borders is therefore crucial in combating the spread of HIV within and across borders.

In response to the threat posed by HIV and AIDS, the East African Community developed a Multisectoral HIV and AIDS Strategic Plan (2008-2013) and an implementation framework to

operationalise it. The Community requested and obtained financial and technical support from the Swedish and Norwegian Governments through the Swedish International Development Agency (Sida) and from the Republic of Ireland through Irish AID in November 2008. The EAC Secretariat then established the HIV and AIDS Unit in 2008 to operationalise the Strategic Plan. Since 2008 when the EAC began implementing the Multisectoral HIV and AIDS Strategic Plan (2008-2013), many global, regional, national and institutional events have taken place in the HIV and AIDS field which have contributed to shaping the HIV and AIDS response at various levels. Most notable was the development and adoption of the 4th EAC Development Strategy (2012-2016) and the UN High Level Meeting (HLM) that took place in June 2011. These events have prompted the revision and realignment of the Strategic Plan (2008-2013).

2. The Realigned HIV and AIDS Strategic Plan (2012-2014): Mission, Vision, Goal and Objectives

The realigned HIV and AIDS Strategic Plan (2012-2014) is now in place and was approved by the 7th EAC Sectoral Council on Regional Cooperation on Health in March 2012. The Plan's Vision is ***"an East African Community free of HIV and AIDS"*** and the Mission is ***"coordinated, evidence based and effective regional HIV and AIDS response"***. The Goal of the Plan is ***"reduced incidence of HIV infection in the East African region in order to secure sustained socio- economic development"***.

The realigned Plan is in line with the 4th EAC Development Strategy's priorities for the Social Sector and the strategic interventions for the Health Sector. The Strategic Objectives of the Plan are:

- i. To scale up regional and national leadership involvement, commitment and ownership for sustainability of HIV and AIDS response
- ii. To facilitate the adoption, harmonization and implementation of international and regional protocols, guideline, policies and strategies;
- iii. To improve the designing, management, and sustainability of HIV responses at national and regional level; and
- iv. To strengthen the coordination and implementation of regional responses for mobile and key populations in the EAC region

The realigned Strategic Plan has four Key Results Areas (KRAs) as outlined below:

- i. A committed and proactive regional and national leadership
- ii. Scale up accessibility, affordability and availability of HIV and AIDS Prevention, Care, Treatment and Support Services in the region

- iii. Evidence based policies and guidelines are in place to inform the regional HIV and AIDS interventions
- iv. Regional programmes targeting mobile and key in the EAC Region.

3. Achievements of the HIV and AIDS Programme

The HIV and AIDS Unit (HAU) at the East African Secretariat is responsible for managing activities related to HIV and AIDS, and has four members of staff. The HAU provides leadership, coordination and management of EAC's regional response to HIV and AIDS with the support and collaboration of the National AIDS Control Councils (NACs), National AIDS Control Programmes (NACPs) and the Ministries responsible for Health (among other ministries) in the EAC Partner States.

Since inception in 2008, the HIV and AIDS programme at EAC has made major strides. The programme has invested in strengthening of the capacity of EAC Secretariat to implement the HIV and AIDS programme by imparting programme development and management skills geared at ensuring long term and sustainable financial and human resource support for the implementation of the HIV and AIDS programme. In the same vein, the programme, in collaboration with the Partner States, has instituted management structures comprising the HIV and AIDS, STIs and TB Technical Working Group and the Monitoring and Evaluation Sub-group to guide planning and implementation of HIV and AIDS activities.

The EAC Secretariat has in place a HIV and AIDS Workplace Policy which the HIV and AIDS Unit has began operationalising by developing HIV and AIDS mainstreaming guidelines. In addition the HIV and AIDS programme has worked with various sectors in the EAC namely Education, Peace and Security, and Tourism to mainstream HIV in their programme activities and budgets.

Another major achievement of the HIV and AIDS programme is the development of the Regional HIV and AIDS Prevention and Management Bill 2012. The Bill, which is currently in the EAC Partner States for assent after being passed by the East African Legislative Assembly (EALA), was developed in close collaboration with a regional Civil Society Organisation, the Eastern Africa National Networks of AIDS Service Organizations (EANNASO).

The HIV and AIDS Unit also established an HIV and AIDS programme managed by an institution of the EAC, the Lake Victoria Basin Commission (LVBC), that targeted fishing communities, agricultural plantation workers and university students within the Lake Victoria Basin. The EALP programme has successfully conducted HIV Sero-behavioural Studies among university students, fishing communities and plantation workers in Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania and Rwanda. Similar

studies are yet to be undertaken in the Republic of Burundi. The studies have generated information that is influencing policy and programming in the EAC Partner States.

The EAC HIV and AIDS programme has now embarked on efforts to harmonise HIV and AIDS, STIs and TB prevention, care and treatment guidelines and protocols in the Partner States which ultimately will lead to simplified treatment schedules which will eventually help in drug adherence; help avoid regime changes for individuals engaged in cross border movement; simplify training thus encouraging decentralized service provision and enable bulk purchase of drugs in the sub region. The programme has engaged Partner States on how best to harmonise the guidelines and protocols by holding in-country consultations to find out what protocols each of the Partner States is implementing and come up with the basis for harmonisation.

In addition, the HIV and AIDS Unit is currently in the final stages of producing the 1st EAC Regional HIV and AIDS Response Report 2013. The purpose of the report is to provide accurate information on the HIV and AIDS current status and epidemic trends in the region and report on the epidemic response and progress made in reaching national, regional, continental, and global commitments. In addition, the report will provide an account of the political commitment and actions to respond to the HIV epidemic, and provide a firm foundation and basis for discussing the HIV and AIDS epidemic, its response and related issues in the region, as well provide the basis for EAC integration programmes to address the HIV and AIDS epidemic in the region. The report is awaiting peer review before dissemination.

Another major achievement of the EAC HIV and AIDS programme has been conducting a comparative analysis of the EAC Partners States' HIV, health and related legislation, bills, policies and strategies. The main purpose of the study was to identify strategic gaps and challenges in the domestic legal and regulatory frameworks of Partner States, in relation to the EAC HIV and AIDS Prevention and Management Bill. A legal reform framework has been developed and the EAC will work with Partner States to implement it.

Other major activities that are currently being undertaken by the HIV and AIDS programme include:

- i. The development of the 2nd EAC HIV and AIDS, TB and STIs strategic plan (2020-2015). All the Partner States have been consulted on the possible areas of focus for the new plan and the HAU is currently working with consultants to develop the first draft
- ii. The development of a regional strategy for integrated, health and HIV programming along the transport corridors in the East African Community Region. The EAC has noted that transport corridors are a space full of activity but have limited access to quality health services, with increasing vulnerabilities to HIV infection.

- iii. A proposed high level discussion on seeking alternative ways to sustain the financing of HIV and AIDS programmes in the region

The EAC Secretariat is committed to providing leadership in the implementation of a viable and sustainable HIV and AIDS response in the region.