



Joint Youth Statement on the 2021 Political Declaration on HIV and AIDS

Ending inequalities and getting on track to end AIDS by 2030

8/6/21

The 2021 Youth Working Group for the High-Level Meeting welcomes the adoption of a new Political Declaration on HIV and AIDS. We appreciate and commend the leadership of the Co-Facilitators, Australia and Namibia, in this process. We are disappointed by the efforts of a small number of member states to derail the process and are encouraged by the overwhelming support for the Political Declaration. We are also disappointed by the number of member states that have disassociated from paragraphs that as young people, while we find they are not strong enough, are still crucial for a comprehensive AIDS response. We have seen clearly how far there is to go to end AIDS by 2030.

We are pleased to see references to and commitments on education (both in and out of school) and employment, both of which were identified as priorities for ending new HIV acquisitions and support adherence to treatment by young people globally. Furthermore, the recognition of food security, housing, and social protection is encouraging; now is the time to put that into practice for young people. A holistic approach to the health and wellbeing of young people, and in particular young key populations, will be key to ending AIDS.

That is not to say that the new Political Declaration is a perfect document. Unfortunately, as we have seen, there is still a lack of commitment by member states to recognise the importance of Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) and its implementation. CSE is crucial not only to reducing new HIV acquisitions among young people; it is also key for reducing HIV and key population-related stigma and discrimination; reducing and ending sexual and gender-based violence, and reducing inequalities. We note commitments made to end stigma, discrimination, and sexual and gender-based violence; however, these come off as empty promises without the commitment to implement CSE. We call on member states to listen to us young people when we say you will not end sexual and gender-based violence, as well as reverse trends on reduced condom usage and knowledge of HIV prevention, without full implementation of CSE. If sexuality education for young people is not comprehensive, we will be missing critical elements necessary to overcome the barriers that are preventing and slowing down progress on ending AIDS. If member states hide behind language such as “relevant to cultural contexts” to avoid teaching young people about topics they are not comfortable with, a key HIV prevention tool will be missing from national responses. There is no way around it; there is no hiding it – CSE is key to ending AIDS. We call on member states to do better for their young people.

Furthermore, we note with alarm the lack of commitment on sexual rights within the Political Declaration. The realisation, enjoyment, and protection of sexual rights are key not only to ending the AIDS epidemic, but more widely to ensure the holistic health and wellbeing of everyone. Member states cannot shy away from young people’s sexuality, and governments must step up to ensure that these rights are protected.

We welcome the inclusion of harm reduction, in particular the specific mention and naming of different harm reduction strategies for people who use drugs. However, we are disappointed to see no mention of young key populations, apart from young people who use drugs. While the document does make specific reference to key populations, and names them, the lack of recognition of young



key populations and the intersecting forms of oppression we face is discouraging to us who are advocating for the rights and recognition of our communities – those most affected by HIV and AIDS. Ending AIDS will not be achieved by ignoring swathes of the populations most impacted by HIV; we call on member states to go beyond the commitments made in the Political Declaration and recognise and support the leadership of young key populations at the national level.

We are alarmed and dissatisfied with the paragraph allowing countries to define the key populations and the paragraph reaffirming national sovereignty. HIV is a global issue and must be treated as such – it will not be ended by member states hiding behind sovereignty clauses to continue human rights abuses against key populations and ignoring our needs and demands. Such clauses will allow member states to actively ignore the needs of the most marginalized key populations and will serve to further widen the inequalities we are trying to end. Member states must be bold and push for unified global action on ending inequalities for all communities and key populations as defined by UNAIDS. We urge member states to make decisions based on scientific evidence and not on culture, to support and fund the leadership of populations that need it most, including young people and young key populations.

While the recognition of restrictive legal and policy frameworks in general is important, we are disappointed to see a lack of strong language around these issues in the Political Declaration. It is not enough to “review and reform” restrictive laws and policies – these must be repealed and abolished. Member states must also commit to listening and implementing the demands of communities when repealing restrictive and discriminatory laws and policies. As young people we want to make clear that we do not believe the language in the 2021 Political Declaration goes far enough; there must be commitments made to fully decriminalise sex work; to fully decriminalise drug use and possession; to fully repeal any laws that criminalise LGBTQI+ people, and to fully repeal any laws and policies that restrict adolescents’ and young people’s access to the full continuum of HIV services, and all health services.

We acknowledge the commitment to engage with youth-led organisations, but also note that this does not go far enough for us. Member states must fund and support youth-led responses to HIV as an instrumental response to ending AIDS. Giving us a seat at the table and asking for our inputs is not enough anymore, particularly when it is still expected that we be grateful for these opportunities, often unpaid, when in reality they are the bare minimum that we should be provided with. Pay us for our time, pay us for our expertise, pay us for our leadership.

The 2021 Political Declaration is a step in the right direction, but only if implemented fully, by all member states. We, as young advocates, leaders, service users, and members of key populations, call on member states to recognise the Political Declaration as the bare minimum that needs to be done. It is not a prescriptive document; we urge to you continue to listen to and fund young people if we are ever to reach the goal of ending AIDS by 2030.

