

Executive Director

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26 January 2016

Dear Colleagues,

Thank you for your open letter of October 2015 expressing your concerns to myself and other international members of the EECAAC Conference Organizing Committee about the 5th Eastern Europe and Central Asia AIDS Conference (EECAAC 2016). As I serve as the Co-Chair of EECAAC 2016, I am very grateful for your thoughtful feedback on this important issue, which UNAIDS has reviewed in detail with officials in the Russian Government as well as other countries in the region, international and national scientific, government and civil society partners.

The Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) considers that EECAAC 2016 comes at a critical time for the future of the global AIDS response. With the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals and the new UNAIDS 2016–2021 Strategy, EECAAC 2016 is a unique opportunity to get the region of Eastern Europe and Central Asia on the Fast-Track to ending the AIDS epidemic and reach people being left behind.

We respect the right of any individual or organization to freedom of choice, including exercising their right to refrain from any event or conference where they do not feel safe or do not feel that they can make a positive contribution. In recent weeks, UNAIDS has worked with the Conference Organizing Committee to ensure that the conference programme features an open, evidence-based discussion on the key issues facing the HIV epidemic in the region. The updated draft conference programme now includes several sessions on HIV prevention, treatment and support among people who inject drugs, including opiate substitution therapy; HIV prevention, treatment and support among sex workers, men who have sex with men; and the role of civil society and non-governmental organizations. The conference will also feature the participation of scientific representatives from over 50 countries, including the majority of EECA countries, which aims to ensure the balance of national perspectives -- the importance of which you stress in your open letter.

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WHO
WORLD BANK

20 Avenue Appia
1211 Geneva 27
Switzerland

+41 22 791 4722 office
+41 22 791 4179 fax

unaids.org

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UNAIDS has raised in various fora the issue of participation of OST clients in the conference. Unfortunately, consistent with existing Russian legislation, clients of methadone and buprenorphine programmes will not be allowed to enter the Russian Federation with their own supply of these substances, and provisions cannot be made to provide OST onsite for those in need. This is a recognized shortcoming of the conference and we regret that our efforts to secure an exception for continuation of treatment of transitory passengers have not borne fruit.


However, this shortcoming further strengthens the importance of EECAAC 2016 to provide a critical fora discussion on progress and obstacles to the regional implementation of OST. We expect that the conference will serve as a forum for many countries in EECA to discuss the results of their OST programmes and share lessons learnt, including with representatives of the Russian Federation. UNAIDS continues to ensure full access to evidence-based effective HIV services for all, including through submitting an amicus curiae intervention to the European Court of Human Rights.

The Conference Organizing Committee has also invested necessary efforts to ensure full and active participation of the representatives of the LGBTQI community, and is confident that such participation shall not be misconstrued as propaganda. EECAAC 2016 is intended to serve as a safe space for all the communities most affected by HIV to raise issues of concern, and discuss the way forward in addressing them.

UNAIDS is pleased to note that a wide range of partners from civil society and people living with HIV have expressed interest in participating in the conference. An open letter on the conference website has been signed by 79 civil society representatives from 15 countries in support of participation in the conference: <http://www.eecaac2016.org/news/1766/> These are important voices that deserve the opportunity to be heard at EECAAC 2016.

These developments reflect a sincere effort by the Conference Organizing Committee to ensure that the conference will feature timely and much needed discussions on even the most sensitive issues. On behalf of the Conference Organizing Committee, I would encourage you to reconsider participating in EECAAC 2016 to make your important voices heard in Moscow.

Yours sincerely,



Michel Sidibé