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HIV AND YOUNG PEOPLE: *Challenges and Opportunities*

Policy Brief

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POLICY BRIEF

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The "HIV/AIDS Prevention Project for Youth" (HAPPY project), supported by the UNICEF Georgia aims to increase awareness about HIV infection among 15-19 year-olds adolescents in Tbilisi (the Capital) and 5 municipalities (Akhaltsikhe, Gori, Kutaisi, Zugdidi, Batumi) of Georgia.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Despite a relatively low prevalence rate, the HIV/AIDS epidemic remains a significant public health concern in Georgia. Young people make up a segment of the population that is particularly vulnerable to HIV. Adolescents and youth are not considered as separate target groups in the current national HIV/AIDS strategic plan, nor are they a specific target group in various programs and initiatives. Consequently, there is also a lack of preventive and health care services tailored to the needs of young people.

In order to find ways to improve youth-oriented HIV prevention programs, a structured dialogue with young people on HIV/AIDS issues was held in the capital and 5 cities: Gori, Akhaltsikhe, Kutaisi, Zugdidi and Batumi. The structured dialogue was conducted using the innovative "World Café" method. A total of 122 young people aged 15-19 participated in the consultative meetings.

As a result of the analysis of the study results, the following recommendations were developed:

1. Considering the needs of adolescents and youth in the development and implementation of the national response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic

It is very important to include measures aimed at adolescents and youth in national strategic documents for the prevention and control of HIV/AIDS and to provide a mechanism for sustainable financing and national coordination of these measures. According to the Declaration of the UN General Special Session on AIDS, to ensure a future generation free of HIV, it is necessary to implement comprehensive, evidence-based prevention strategies, responsible sexual behavior, evidence and skills-based youth specific HIV education, mass media interventions, and the provision of youth friendly health services.

2. Youth participation in planning and implementation of national response to HIV

Meaningfully involving adolescents and youth as beneficiaries in the development of HIV interventions, policies that affect their health and funding streams increases the efficacy of the efforts. By acknowledging and incorporating the needs and experiences of the intended beneficiaries - young people themselves - the programs are better placed to deliver on

expectations and provide results. When young people participate in the HIV response as partners, they are included in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of programs, policies and interventions that affect their health and HIV outcomes. Young people drive social change when they are empowered with the skills and resources to participate as leaders in their own communities.

3. Prevention of HIV infection through formal education

In order for young people to have basic information about HIV infection and ways to prevent it, it is necessary that the school program pays due attention to this topic. Teacher training programs should consider how important it is to inform young people about HIV/AIDS in order to establish a healthy lifestyle.

4. Non-formal education, youth workers and youth organizations

For implementing HIV prevention among young people through non-formal education, youth workers and youth serving organizations are important resources that have wide access to young people from different groups.

Youth workers and organizations working with young people should develop HIV infection prevention programs with the help of specialists, and actively use them in the process of working with adolescents and young people; They should keep in mind that young people most like events that involve their active participation - discussions, workshops, information campaigns, peer education.

5. Support of youth HIV prevention programs by the local government agencies (LGA)

For the effective work of youth serving organizations, it is important that LGAs provide financial support to youth initiatives aimed at promoting a healthy lifestyle and preventing sexually transmitted infections, including HIV/AIDS.

An effective LGA Response to HIV/AIDS should be: (1) Consistent in what it does with National AIDS Policy and oriented to the needs of the local context; (2) Focused on functional integration of preventive programs into existing development programmes of the LGA; (3) Committed to enhancing youth participation in planning, programme design, and implementation; (4) Oriented to mobilising and coordinating resources within and beyond the LGA (business, civil society, donors).

6. Peer education

Peer-to-peer education should be widely used for preventive education of young people and development of appropriate skills. Using this cost-effective and efficient approach is particularly important to deliver prevention information and messages to adolescents and youth residing in rural areas and those, who are not in education, employment or training (NEET). This approach is also effective for working with vulnerable and at-risk youth.

7. Use of digital technologies to disseminate HIV prevention information

Modern digital technologies such as websites, social networks, apps, chatbots and messaging services allow young people to learn independently and ask the right questions. Also, in this way, peer educators can also spread information.

It is desirable to create a website that will provide adolescents and youth with reliable information related to HIV infection in various forms and will allow them to get answers to questions they are interested in. Also, it would be good if information is disseminated among young people through popular social networks. However, it should be noted that printed material - flyers, leaflets - remains an important means of information dissemination.

Since the Internet is not available in some villages, many young people remain without important information. Therefore, it is necessary that the Internet is equally accessible to young people living in cities and rural areas.

8. Planning and implementation of information campaign

It is important to carry out a well-planned information campaign to change the wrong beliefs and social norms in society (especially among parents of teenagers and young people).

Relevant services in the field of health should periodically carry out information campaigns in order to spread information about the importance of HIV testing and prevention of HIV infection.

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INTRODUCTION

Despite a relatively low prevalence rate, the HIV/AIDS epidemic remains a significant public health concern in Georgia. Based on the latest estimate data (*Spectrum 2021, UNAIDS*) the number of people living with HIV is 8.400, the population prevalence is 0.3% with prevalence being twice as high among the male population (0.4%) than among the female population (0.2%). Despite efforts made to improve access to testing, there are more than half of new HIV diagnoses made at the late stage. Individuals not aware of their HIV status continue to engage in high risk behaviors and unknowingly transmit the virus fueling the growth of the epidemic.

Young people make up a segment of the population that is particularly vulnerable to HIV. Every day there are 4,000 new HIV infections globally. Out of them, 31% are among young people (15–24) (UNAIDS, 2021). The second decade of life is a period of experimentation and risk, and many factors increase young people’s vulnerability to HIV during these years of rapid physical and psychosocial development. These factors include a lack of knowledge about HIV/AIDS, lack of education and life skills, poor access to health services and commodities, early sexual debut, early marriage, etc.

Awareness of young people and adolescents remains low regarding HIV/AIDS in Georgia. According to the qualitative study conducted by the UNFPA among young people in 2020, only the small proportions of study participants have accurate information about HIV (routes of transmission, testing, treatment). Mostly, knowledge is incomplete and mixes up both correct and incorrect information. Young people have very little information about the course of HIV/AIDS disease, it’s treatment and HIV testing. It was revealed that majority of young people have no idea where to go in their city for HIV testing. According to another survey, only 11% of adolescents and youth aged 15-24 have comprehensive knowledge about the routes of HIV transmission, 60% reveal discriminatory attitudes towards people living with HIV/AIDS and only 33% of young people aged 15-24 know where to get HIV testing services (Multi-Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS6), Georgia, 2018).

Low awareness on HIV/AIDS issues and importance of HIV testing and location of the testing sites among young people not only increases their vulnerability towards the infection, but



further exacerbates stigma towards HIV-positive people, which in turn hinders effectiveness of the HIV/AIDS country response.

The adolescents and youth are not considered as separate target groups in national HIV/AIDS strategies and plans in Georgia. Consequently, there is also a lack of preventive and health care services tailored to the needs of young people. There are significant obstacles to involving youth in participatory health promotion approaches. Youth are often viewed by adults as lacking requisite knowledge and skills to enable participation. These beliefs can result in young people's knowledge being undervalued or dismissed and may prevent adults from seeing youth as equal partners capable of contributing to social change. When young people participate in the HIV response as partners, it will create opportunities or remove barriers to promote HIV prevention.

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STUDY DESCRIPTION

Structured dialogue on HIV issues engaging **15–19-years-old adolescents** had been conducted in Tbilisi and 5 targeted cities – Gori, Akhaltsikhe, Kutaisi, Zugdidi and Batumi. A total of 122 young people aged 15-19 participated. Average duration of the consultative meeting: 3 hours.

The **purpose** of the structured dialogue process is to ensure that young people's views are taken into account when defining youth-oriented HIV prevention policies and practices.

The **objectives** of the structured dialogue are: 1. Assessing of current youth-oriented HIV prevention programs in the country by young people; 2. Finding ways to improve preventive programs focused on young people; 3. Identifying the factors that will contribute to the inclusion of young people in HIV/AIDS prevention programs.

The structured dialogue was conducted using the innovative "**World Café**" method. In our case, we are talking about a "youth cafe" that provides a safe, welcoming environment in which to intentionally connect multiple ideas and perspectives on a topic by engaging participants in several rounds of small-group conversation.

The following issues were discussed during the discussions:

1. Adolescents' and youth's knowledge of existing prevention programs and services;
2. What should be the best HIV prevention program for young people;
3. The role of young people, their involvement in the prevention of HIV infection;
4. Barriers and contributing factors to youth participation in prevention programs

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STUDY RESULTS

Availability of HIV prevention programs

Programs for adolescents and young people are not sufficient and accessible to all.

Most of the adolescents participating in the dialogue have never heard of HIV prevention programs. A small number named international and non-governmental organizations (Red Cross, UN Agencies, Helping Hands, Hera XXI) that work with young people on this issue. Only a few of the participating youth participated in the trainings and events conducted by these organizations.

The main barriers to adolescent and youth's participation in preventive programs are that such programs and information campaigns are mainly held in big cities. Due to the lack of internet access for young people in rural, especially mountainous regions, not only youth programs, but also information about HIV infection in general, is not available.

In all cities, it was noted that school teachers avoid talking about HIV infection.

This topic is taboo in families. Adolescents believe that parents are not serious about the involvement of young people in such programs, and some even consider it shameful and do not allow their children to participate. It was noted that the reason for this attitude of parents is their lack of information.

What should an youth-focused HIV prevention program look like?

Participants of the discussion believe that the main purpose of youth programs is to provide information to young people - what HIV is, how it is transmitted, how to protect yourself and where to get tested for HIV. They should be able to acquire this knowledge through both formal and non-formal education. In the school, more attention should be paid to issues related to HIV infection provided by the educational program. Biology and civic education teachers need to be retrained, information days should be held with the participation of invited specialists, doctors and psychologists.

As for non-formal education, it was said that time should be devoted to HIV infection issues in youth camps, trainings and discussions should be held on this topic. Videos, applications should be placed in the Internet, emphasis should be done on those social networks that are popular among young people. It would be good to promote the topic by influencers. It is necessary to create thematic clubs in all municipalities, where peer educators will be trained. A special online platform should be created where it will be possible to ask questions anonymously. Printed information materials - flyers and leaflets were also named as one of the ways of information dissemination.

Involvement of adolescents and youth in the prevention of HIV infection

According to the discussion participants, youth is not actively involved in the prevention of HIV infection. The participants believe that the majority of young people are not interested in these issues, which is mainly due to the lack of information and the existing HIV-related stigma. Teachers and parents do not talk to young people about topics related to sex.

Improving youth-focused HIV prevention programs by increasing youth participation

The participants of the discussion believe that the more young people are involved in preventive programs, the more correct information will be spread, caution will increase, the number of infected people will decrease and the attitude of the society towards infected people will change, which will alleviate their condition.

Interested young people can participate in trainings and then, share the knowledge gained with their peers, take care of reducing the stigma spread in the society.

Peer education through joyful workshops and trainings was identified as the best way to engage young people, as well as helping the people living with HIV/AIDS on voluntary basis. Also, they believe that the young people themselves should create supervisory groups that will monitor the sanitary conditions in salons and medical institutions.

Strengthening and activation of youth organizations and their support from the municipalities are considered necessary for ensuring youth involvement and effectiveness.

Promotion of youth engagement in HIV/AIDS prevention programs

In order to increase the engagement of young people in HIV/AIDS preventive programs, it is necessary to better inform young people, to train peer educators. All structures need to take care of dissemination of information to increase knowledge and interest in HIV/AIDS. The Internet should be made available to everyone and more time should be devoted to the topic of HIV/AIDS on TV. Municipalities should allocate the relevant spaces for youth clubs to hold discussions and trainings, support youth activities with small grants.

In the schools, more attention should be paid to issues related to HIV infection provided by the educational program. Biology and civic education teachers need to be retrained, information days should be held with the participation of invited specialists - doctors and psychologists.

Health representatives should conduct information campaigns for young people and conferences for teachers.

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OPPORTUNITIES AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STRENGTHENING HIV PREVENTION

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ATTACHMENT – SURVEY QUESTIONS

- 1. What HIV prevention programs are currently available around you, in the region and in the country as a whole, and what is available for young people? *What is being done to reduce the risk of HIV infection among young people in your environment? What are the barriers for young people to use such programs?***
- 2. When we say - HIV prevention program for young people, how do you imagine what are the main features of such a program? *What do you think is necessary for young people to be protected from HIV infection? Imagine and describe what the best HIV prevention program for young people would look like?***
- 3. What is the role of young people, their involvement in the prevention of HIV infection? *How and in what form do young people contribute to the prevention of the spread of HIV infection? What barriers are there?***
- 4. What positive changes will occur in improving youth-focused HIV prevention programs if your involvement increases? *What do you think is your ideal engagement option? What format can be used to ensure engagement and effectiveness?***
- 5. In your opinion, what positive changes are needed in your municipality and country to increase youth involvement in HIV/AIDS prevention programs? *What should be done in this regard by various actors - local and central government, health and education representatives, non-governmental sector, media, youth themselves and other stakeholders?***