

IAS Educational Fund and MU-JHU Care Ltd./MU-JHU Research Collaboration Symposium

Community and youth at the centre of a science-led HIV response in East Africa Meeting report

This report was developed in collaboration with MU-JHU Care Ltd./MU-JHU Research Collaboration (MU-JHU). The views expressed in the report do not necessarily reflect the views of IAS – the International AIDS Society.

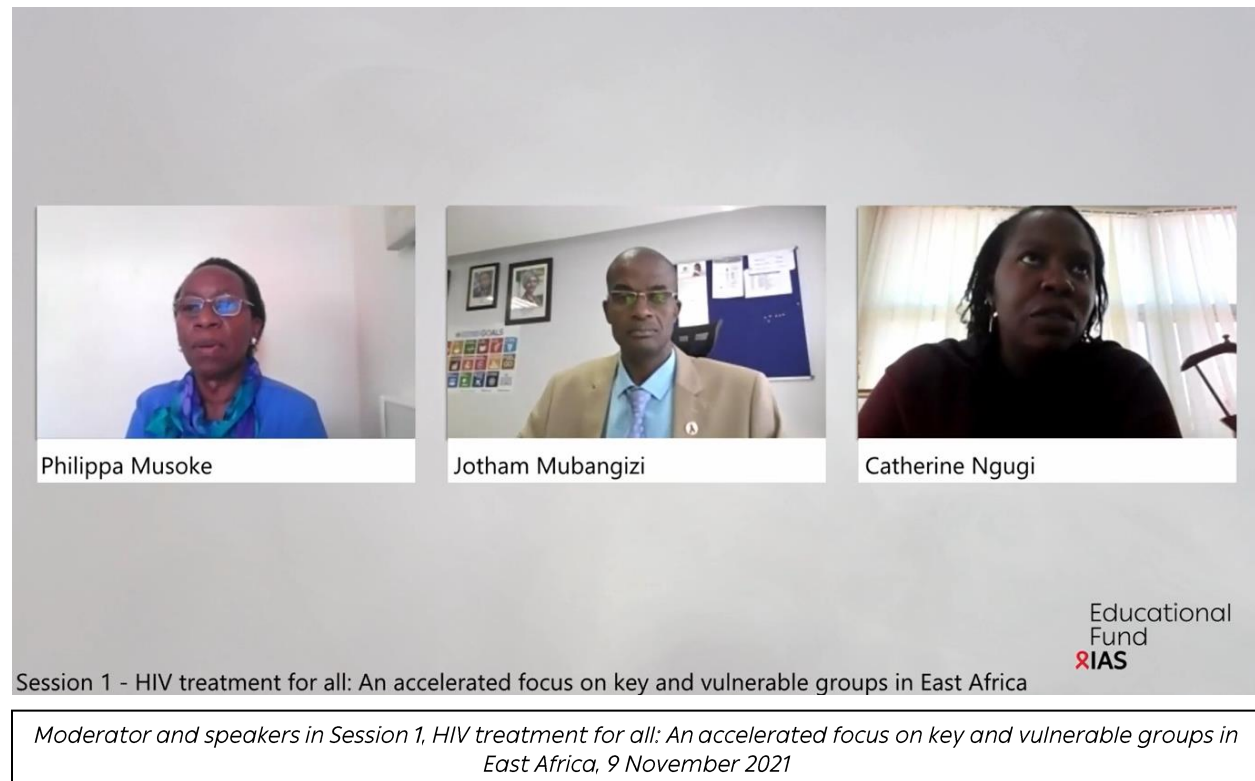
IAS – the International AIDS Society – Educational Fund and MU-JHU Care Ltd./MU-JHU Research Collaboration (MU-JHU) symposium was held virtually and at the MU-JHU offices in Kampala, Uganda, on 9 and 10 November 2021 with the theme, ***Community and youth at the centre of a science-led HIV response in East Africa.***

Philippa Musoke (MU-JHU, Uganda), Kenneth Ngunjiri (IAS; Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology Kenya) and Nelson Musoba (Uganda AIDS Commission) provided opening remarks in Session 1 on 'HIV treatment for all: An accelerated focus on key and vulnerable groups in East Africa'. Both Philippa Musoke and Nelson Musoba mentioned that it is of great importance to integrate communities and youth in discussions around finding innovative solutions for the HIV response to identify key areas of focus for communities to easily adopt. Julianne Etima (MU-JHU, Uganda) chaired Session 2 of the symposium, covering the topic of "Innovative

prevention methods in Uganda and East Africa". Lastly, Sabrina Kitaka (Makarere University, Uganda) chaired Session 3 on, "HIV, adolescents and youth: The next critical actions", and Josephine Nabukenya (IAS; MU-JHU, Uganda), Philippa Musoke and Kenneth Ngunjiri provided closing remarks for the meeting. The detailed programme is available [here](#), and the session recordings are available [here](#).

The overall aim of the meeting was to address the key topics as regional issues that must be addressed: providing HIV treatment for all; addressing stigma and discrimination; innovative treatment as prevention; and HIV, youth and adolescents. The speakers and participants thoroughly discussed each of the topics and provided suggestions and solutions, shared best practices and recommendations and addressed the identified challenges. This report highlights current challenges and key recommendations shared during the meeting.

Session 1 – HIV treatment for all: An accelerated focus on key and vulnerable groups in East Africa

**1. New HIV acquisitions are mostly identified from key populations and vulnerable groups**

With more than half of the global population of people living with HIV in the region, gender disparities persist with more adolescent girls and young women as living with HIV. In addition, most new cases of HIV acquisition are seen amongst key populations and their partners in East and South Africa. Male involvement in the HIV testing and treatment cascade remains a challenge.

Key recommendations:

- Empower communities and place them at the centre of national and subnational HIV responses, such as recommending the provision of combination HIV prevention for adolescent girls and young women and other key populations.
- Address structural and social barriers, including harmful social norms and gender-based violence, while improving male involvement in the HIV response.

2. Stigma and discrimination

Stigma, discrimination, criminalization and violence continue to be rampant amongst key populations in the region, leading to limited access to healthcare services, resulting in an increase in the risk of HIV acquisition and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs). The commitment to leave no one behind thus requires the elimination of HIV-related stigma, discrimination of human rights, and legal barriers that impede access to health services.

Key recommendations:

- Encourage community-based organizations to support key populations and provide a one-stop centre to testing, treatment and care, as well as address structural barriers.
- Use peer navigators to support linkage to care for key populations and support people who are on ART.
- Adopt technologies-based solutions, such as the use of platforms to send short targeted messages which have proved useful in enrolling key populations into care, as well as provide online care support.

3. COVID-19 pandemic and the HIV response

The COVID-19 pandemic poses a threat to the gains made towards ending the HIV epidemic in the region. Restrictions and their effects, such as fear and anxiety, initially had an impact on the HIV response with noted reduction in identification of HIV cases. However, HIV programmes have been resilient and developed strategies ensuring that the retention on treatment for people living with HIV has remained stable. Some innovative strategies included: the distribution of ART to homes by peers and community health workers; three-month ART supply; use of boda-boda (motorcycles) to deliver ART; outreach clinics and mobile services to key populations; mobile services innovations and scale-up of distribution of HIV self-testing.

Key recommendations:

- Sustain and scale-up impactful solutions beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Plan for HIV commodities to minimize interruptions of treatment supply.
- Document lessons learned to inform policy and future service delivery approaches.
- Increase and encourage COVID-19 vaccinations for people living with HIV and health workers.

4. Virtual psychosocial platforms

There is an increase in the use and need of virtual psychosocial support (PSS) platforms such as WhatsApp groups in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. These have mostly been piloted with young people who suggest having more digital and friendly resources that can be used for virtual discussions. Challenges in this approach include limited internet access, ownership of internet-enabled phones, affordability of airtime and data, confidentiality and privacy of shared devices, and gender imbalances with young men having more access to devices compared to young women.

Key recommendations:

- Offer more options of digital platforms to increase variety in avenues for engagement and communication with young people.
- Expand digital technology to offer an opportunity to build digital literacy among young people.
- Consider more models that also function while offline and address issues of privacy and confidentiality.

Session 2 – Innovative prevention methods in Uganda and East Africa

1. Oral PrEP

The current effective self-controlled HIV prevention method is oral PrEP. However, PrEP adherence remains a challenge. Oral PrEP is available to most key populations and priority populations in the region, and is delivered through health centres, drop-in centres, peers and community pharmacies.

Key recommendations:

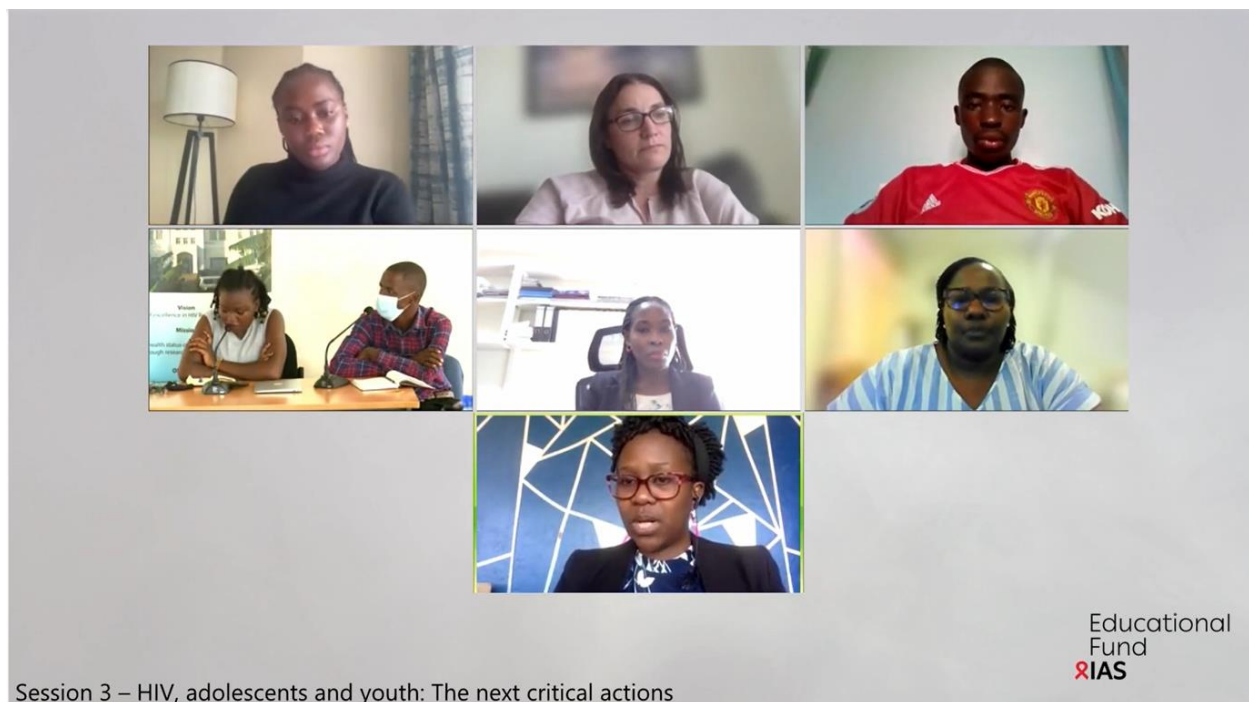
- Provide differentiated PrEP delivery models and de-medicalize PrEP.
- Encourage task shifting and the use of community health workers and peers to deliver PrEP through community distribution points, while integrating it with self-testing.
- Normalize continuation and re-initiation of PrEP while addressing issues of stigma related to PrEP initiation and usage.

2. Novel HIV prevention options

Choice matters in HIV prevention, as the one-size-fits-all approach does not cover all needs. The Dapivirine vaginal ring is now available for use in Zimbabwe and Kenya, thus creating an option for women that is about 50% effective if kept in the vagina for a month. Several other novel innovative HIV prevention options are still in various stages of clinical trials and these include injectable PrEP options, single pills, long-acting implants and broad neutralizing antibodies in East Africa.

Key recommendations:

- Roll out the Dapivirine ring in all East African countries by joining efforts with various stakeholders, including governments, civil societies and the community at large.
- Tailor interventions for real-world practices and individual needs and wants.
- Involve communities during the various stages of clinical trials while developing products.

Session 3 – HIV, adolescents and youth: The next critical actions

Moderator, speakers and panelists in Session 3, Engaging adolescents and young people, 10 November 2021

1. HIV prevention is key among adolescents and young people in East Africa

New infections continue to be observed among adolescents and young people between 10-24 years old, even though there is an overall decline in new HIV acquisitions in the general population. Prevention

of HIV is therefore critical in this population group and with a special focus on adolescent girls and young women, who are disproportionately affected by HIV and AIDS in comparison to their male counterparts. At the same time, young men are thrice more likely to acquire HIV than older men. Daily oral PrEP has been approved for use in East African countries; however, its rollout and access for many young people remains a challenge.

Key recommendations:

- Integrating innovative approaches, such as the peers and integration of prevention services into other healthcare programmes, such as family planning clinics, could be a useful method to reach young people that continue to be vulnerable to HIV acquisition.
- Involve youth in clinical trials to develop acceptable and safe methods for this population.
- Adopt youth trial boards in different research programmes.

2. Community support in HIV testing and adherence to ART

HIV testing remains a critical means to identify new cases of HIV. There is a need for programmes to identify and support the linkage into care for adolescents and young people. Adherence to ART remains key in the care of adolescents and young people living with HIV. The Community Adherence and Treatment Support (CATS) programme in Zimbabwe has been useful in reducing mental health challenges, including stigma and discrimination due to strengthening psychosocial support for this vulnerable group.

Key recommendation:

- Continue encouraging adolescent and young people's adherence to treatment through virtual support, such as WhatsApp and by SMS.

3. Reaching adolescents and young people during the COVID-19 pandemic

As the effects of COVID-19 continue to linger, providing psychosocial support to address anxiety and stress related to the pandemic and supporting adolescents and young people to be vaccinated is critical to avoid co-morbidities. Prolonged closures of schools in some East African countries has adversely affected young people, making them more prone to domestic violence, early marriage, and teenage pregnancy.

Key recommendation:

- Governments in East Africa must prioritize providing economic support, youth-friendly social activities, access to vocational institutes and other support systems for critical cases in vulnerable groups whose schooling and access to education is negatively impacted.

Testimonials

"I will share knowledge and attitudes gained with my colleagues and together we shall support participants to adhere to the HIV preventive measures and options provided."

Healthcare worker at an NGO

"Overall the symposium was an eye opener on the various scientific innovation in HIV response, lesson from other countries, and a better understanding of the current interventions in HIV science."

Media representative in a government.

"I will use the knowledge gained to educate the communities I serve on updates of HIV prevention research and upcoming studies. I will also adopt approaches discussed in reaching key populations and retaining them in Studies."

Researcher at an NGO

"I can now influence young people to be involved in the HIV preventive measures introduced so far"

Educator/trainer at a faith-based organization