



MEDIA RELEASE

STEPPING UP TO PREVENT HIV IN THE PACIFIC

For Immediate Release

Nadave, Fiji (22 November, 2010) — An estimated 54,000 people were confirmed as living with HIV in the Pacific in 2008; with 5,162 new HIV cases being diagnosed in the same year. Excluding Australia and New Zealand, Papua New Guinea accounted for over 99 percent of reported HIV cases in the region in 2007, with Fiji, French Polynesia, Guam and New Caledonia accounting for the majority of HIV infections.

The figures, contained in a regional UNAIDS report entitled *Turning the Tide*, were revealed at a regional retreat on HIV and sexual reproductive health which opened today at the Centre for Appropriate Technology and Development (CATD) in Nadave.

“A ‘one size fits all’ approach (in addressing HIV) does not suit the diversity of Pacific nations and outdated legislation criminalising homosexuality and commercial sex is a major impediment in the region,” said Mr Rex Horoi, Executive Director of the Foundation for the Peoples of the South Pacific (FSPI).

The regional retreat is part of the FSPI-administered *Stepping Stones* programme which works with peer group community facilitators and communities to facilitate community conversations to address reproductive sexual health, gender based violence in the context of STIs, HIV and teen pregnancies; discrimination and stigma; promote the protection of human rights and encourage positive and responsible behaviour.

The programme is firmly based in participatory learning and focuses on improving cross gender communication with youth and older men and women, building relationship skills and highlighting the consequences of risk-taking behaviour.

“There is much more which needs to be done for community consciousness and actions to be maintained,” said Maire Bopp Dupont, Chief Executive Officer of the Pacific Islands AIDS Foundation (PIAF).

Ms Bopp Dupont who is living with HIV herself, said that while it is critical that those living with HIV were part of the response, more awareness and creative solutions were necessary to alter perceptions and allow these individuals to voice their needs and become an active part of the process of change.

The *Stepping Stones* programme has been implemented in over 70 countries in Asia, Africa, parts of Europe and in the Pacific region in the Federated States of Micronesia (Chuuk), Kiribati, Guam, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. The Cook Islands, Papua New Guinea, Tonga and possibly Tuvalu, will also become part of the programme from next year. (ENDS)

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