

Next Steps For Involvement of NGOs and Civil Society

Prepared by the International Council of AIDS Services Organizations (ICASO)
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Introduction

The purpose of this message is to provide NGOs and civil society organizations with some guidance on what actions they could be taking at country level over the coming weeks.

These are the critical dates with respect to the UNGASS on HIV/AIDS process:

End of March: Release of the draft Declaration of Commitment
May 21-25: Second Informal Consultation Meeting in New York
June 25-27: Special Session in New York

Over the past month, you have probably realized that the process for the UNGASS on HIV/AIDS is changing rapidly. We have had to adapt as we go along. At this time, one thing we are certain of is that NGOs need to comment on the draft Declaration of Commitment at country level and with the U.N. Missions in New York.

However, by the time of the Second Informal Consultation Meeting on May 21-25, we expect that some countries may have formulated their positions with respect to the Declaration. This means that it may be difficult to make major changes to the Declaration at the Consultation meeting. (This is our understanding at this time).

THEREFORE, IT IS CRITICAL THAT NGOs PROVIDE FEEDBACK ON THE DECLARATION DURING THE MONTH OF APRIL.

There are five priorities for NGOs over the coming weeks:

1. Obtain NGO and PWA representation on your country's delegation to UNGASS. This includes both the next informal consultation as well as the Special Session itself.
2. Influence your country's position on the Declaration of Commitment.
3. Advocate for your country to support a trust fund for NGOs and PWAs to attend the UNGASS on HIV/AIDS process.
4. Obtain accreditation for at least one NGO from your country.
5. Continue to participate in discussions on Break-the-Silence.

Each of these priorities is described in more detail below.

1. Obtain NGO and PWA Representation On Your Country's Delegation to UNGASS

It is very important to ensure that NGOs and PWAs are included in your country's delegation. NGOs that attended the First Informal Consultation Meeting in New York in February noted that:

- a) interactions with the Missions (country Missions to the UN in New York) and/or country delegations was a key part of the meeting;
- b) most Missions or delegations welcomed NGO participation;
- c) many countries were still in a state of uncertainty about the composition of their official delegations; and
- d) many Missions had a low level of knowledge about HIV/AIDS, about specific HIV/AIDS policy issues, about global challenges, about the role of civil society and NGOs, and about the UNGASS process itself.

NGO and PWA participation on the country delegations, therefore, will provide an opportunity to educate and influence other members of the delegations on HIV/AIDS and the Special Session. Please consult the ICASO publication, "A Guide for Meaningful Involvement of NGOs and Civil Society," for tips on how to advocate for inclusion on your country's delegation. Copies (English, French and Spanish) are available on the ICASO website at <http://www.icaso.org> and on the website of Health Development Networks at <http://www.hdnet.org>.

There were 3 countries with delegations that included NGOs. Push for NGO participation at both the Second Informal Consultation in May as well as the Special Session in June.

2. Influence your country's position on the Declaration of Commitment.

Whether or not you are successful in obtaining NGO and PWA representation on your country's delegation, you need to create opportunities to influence the position your country takes on the Declaration of Commitment. The Declaration will outline what U.N. member countries plan to do to combat HIV/AIDS. It will set the tone for the global response to the epidemic over the next decade.

The best way to influence the position your country takes is to schedule a meeting between leading NGOs and the members of your country's delegation, or other government officials (most probably the Health Ministry). The purpose of the meeting would be to discuss the draft Declaration of Commitment and to put forward suggestions for how it can be improved. Ideally, this meeting should be scheduled for mid-April. This will allow enough time for NGOs to review the draft Declaration of Commitment before the meeting, and still leave time for your country's delegation to provide input into subsequent drafts of the Declaration of Commitment.

If possible, you should organize an NGO meeting in the early part of April to review the draft Declaration of Commitment. During the review, you should focus on two main areas: (a) the content of the Declaration; and (b) where the money will come from to implement the commitments in the Declaration. When you meet with the members of your country's delegation, you should concentrate on the same two areas. ICASO suggests that you may want to cite and/or use the International Guidelines on HIV/AIDS and Human Rights. The Guidelines can be used as a framework or action plan for countries to assist them in designing programs and policies which protect and promote human rights in the context of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. The NGO Summary of the Guidelines are available in English, French and Spanish, and can be located on the ICASO web site at <http://www.icaso.org>. You can also obtain a full copy of the Guidelines from the UNAIDS web site at <http://www.unaids.org>.

You should also try to schedule a post-UNGASS on HIV/AIDS meeting between leading NGOs and members of your country's delegation. The purpose of that meeting would be to press your government to act on the commitments and actions included in the Declaration of Commitment, and to ask the government how it intends to ensure that the targets spelled out in the Declaration will be met at the national and regional levels in your country.

You should have a media strategy for both the pre-UNGASS and post-UNGASS meetings with your country's delegation. For some tips on how to do this, consult "A Guide for Meaningful Involvement of NGOs and Civil Society."

3. Trust Fund for NGOs and PWAs participation in the UNGASS process

A trust fund has been developed to assist NGOs and PWAs to attend UNGASS on HIV/AIDS meetings. NGOs and PWAs, particularly from donor countries, should press their governments to provide funding for the Trust Fund. This is required to ensure that accredited NGOs, particularly those from developing countries, have the opportunity to travel to New York to participate in this historic meeting.

You should also advocate with key foundations and other funders to support the trust fund or, if necessary, to directly support representatives from your organizations to attend.

REMEMBER, ONLY ACCREDITED ORGANIZATIONS CAN ATTEND THE SPECIAL SUMMIT.

4. Obtain Accreditation for at least one NGO from your country.

There is still time to obtain accreditation for your NGO to attend the Second Preliminary Consultation in May and/or the Special Session itself in June. But you have to hurry: the deadline is March 23, 2001. Accreditation forms can be obtained on the website that the U.N. has set up for this Special Session at <http://www.un.org/ga/aids>. For advice on the process, contact ICASO at info@icaso.org or Health Development Networks at ungass@hdnet.org.

ICASO believes that NGOs and PWAs need to fully participate in the development and monitoring the Declaration. Therefore, we suggest that NGOs, particularly those from developing countries, should seek accreditation. This will allow you to participate in the Second Informal Consultation in May, as well as the three-day Special Session in June, where you will be able to meet with your colleagues from around the world to map out strategies for monitoring the implementation of the Declaration. The Trust Fund is being set up to facilitate NGO participation; only NGOs who are accredited will be able to benefit from any travel support that may be available.

5. Continue to participate in discussions on break-the-silence.

Break-the-Silence is a dedicated e-mail discussion forum for NGOs and civil society established specifically to support transparent and open NGO participation in the Special Session. Issues raised through contributions to this forum will be consolidated and made available to accredited NGOs, government delegations, UN organizations and the media. To join Break-the-Silence, send an e-mail message to: join-break-the-silence@hdnet.org.

OTHER ACTIONS NGOs CAN TAKE

You can send an e-mail message to other NGOs and civil society organizations in your country or region to make sure that they are engaged in this process. Be sure to include NGOs that may not be HIV/AIDS-specific but that nevertheless play a role on the response to the pandemic.

You can also schedule regional meetings of NGOs to discuss the draft Declaration of Commitment and other UNGASS issues.