

For NGOs and Civil Society

UNGASS: Update and Next Steps

PREPARED BY THE INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL OF AIDS SERVICE ORGANIZATIONS (ICASO)
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Introduction

The United Nations General Assembly Special Session (UNGASS) on HIV/AIDS will take place on June 25-27, 2001 in New York. As the date for the Special Session draws closer, the preparatory activities have been moving into high gear. For civil society, much of the attention in the coming weeks will be focussed on activities at country level. NGOs are now lobbying governments for inclusion on country delegations. NGOs are also trying to influence the country delegations on the content of the final Declaration of Commitment, the main product of the Special Session.

This document contains an update on recent developments, information on upcoming events and strategies NGOs can follow in the coming weeks. This is the third in a series of documents from ICASO describing the UNGASS process. The titles of the first two documents are:

- *A Guide for Meaningful Involvement of NGOs and Civil Society* (February 26, 2001)
- *Next Steps for Involvement of NGOs and Civil Society* (March 15, 2001)

Copies of all three documents are available in English, French and Spanish on the ICASO website at <http://www.icaso.org>.

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1.0 Release of the first Draft of the Declaration of Commitment

A draft of the Declaration of Commitment was released in early April 2001. (Copies can be obtained from the UNGASS website at <http://www.un.org/ga/aids>.) Many networks, organizations and individuals from the not-for-profit sector of civil society were very disappointed with the first draft. They felt that it did not capture the urgency of the epidemic and that it fell far short of what was needed to respond to HIV/AIDS. They also felt that the draft Declaration did not reflect the feedback that civil society had provided since the start of the UNGASS process concerning the priorities for responding to the epidemic. A second draft of the Declaration is expected to be released around May 14, 2001.

2.0 How Has Civil Society Been Involved?

Civil society has been working on a number of fronts, both before and after the draft Declaration was released, to provide input. Here are some examples of how civil society has participated in recent weeks:

- ❑ Individuals, networks and organisations have been contributing on an ongoing basis to Break-the-Silence, the dedicated NGO and civil society email discussion forum established to support NGO participation in the UNGASS process. A summary of the comments on this forum can be found on the website of Health Development Networks at <http://www.hdnet.org>
- ❑ NGOs in some countries have been providing input directly to their UNGASS delegations. For example, NGOs in Canada have met with officials from the Federal Government to identify the main issues that need to be covered in the Declaration.
- ❑ NGOs have worked together regionally to provide their input into regional processes. For example, the Coalition of Asia/Pacific Regional Networks on HIV/AIDS organised intra- and inter-network consultations that resulted in the identification of six cross-cutting issues that the Coalition said must be taken into account during UNGASS. A copy of the report from this consultation can be obtained by contacting APCASO at apcaso@pd.jaring.my

Furthermore, in February, a task force of representatives of the Horizontal Technical Cooperation Group of Latin America and the Caribbean, the Latin America and Caribbean Community Network and the Network of Persons Living with HIV/AIDS prepared a report containing a comprehensive list of issues recommendations for consideration in drafting the Declaration of Commitment.

- ❑ Representatives of 31 networks and organizations from around the world met in Geneva, Switzerland on April 25-27, 2001, to review and comment on the declaration. This has been the only opportunity at the global level for representatives of the not-for-profit sector of civil society to meet in person to discuss the draft Declaration and the UNGASS process. The participants of the meeting in Geneva produced a report entitled *Comments on the Draft Declaration of Commitment for the United Nations General Assembly Special Session (UNGASS) on HIV/AIDS*, copies of which are available in English, French and Spanish on the website of ICASO at <http://www.icaso.org>.

- Representatives of business councils on HIV/AIDS met in Johannesburg, South Africa, on May 9, 2001, to look at the business response to HIV/AIDS and to review and comment on the Declaration.

3.0 What's Next in Terms of the UNGASS Process?

Since the draft Declaration was released in early April 2001, member states have been meeting informally at the United Nations to review the draft, and have been providing feedback to the co-facilitators of the UNGASS process, the ambassadors of Sénégal and Australia. On May 4-9, 2001, the co-facilitators met in New York to prepare a second draft of the Declaration of Commitment. We hope that the co-facilitators incorporated the feedback from civil society on the first draft Declaration; we will not know whether this happened until the text of the second Draft is released.

Below is an overview of the process that will take place between now and the Special Session in June. Please remember that this process is constantly evolving.

- **May 14 (approximately):** The second draft of the Declaration will be released.
- **May 21-25:** The Second Informal Consultation Meeting of member states will take place in New York. The main item on the agenda is a discussion of the draft Declaration of Commitment. See separate section below for more details on this meeting.
- **May 25-June 24:** Informal discussions among countries on the draft Declaration will continue. It is not clear whether major changes to the declaration will be made during this period. It is possible that the draft that emerges from the meeting in May will be a near-final draft
- **June 25-27:** The Special Session takes place in New York. At the conclusion of this session, the final Declaration of Commitment will be adopted by the UN General Assembly. See separate section below for a more detailed description of the Special Session.

4.0 What Strategies can NGOs and Civil Society follow?

Over the next few weeks, we need to concentrate our efforts on activities at country level. Here is a list of some actions that NGOs can take:

1. **Circulate the report from the Geneva meeting (*Comments on the Draft Declaration*).** This report represents a consensus of 31 civil society networks and organizations from around the world. Copies have been sent to each country's UN mission. You should circulate the report widely to (a) NGOs in your country, (b) the members of your country's delegation to UNGASS, (c) other key government officials (probably in your ministry of Health and your ministry of Foreign Affairs), (d) representatives in your country of international organizations like the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and (e) national and local media.

2. **Push for NGO representation on your country's delegation to UNGASS.** This is very important because the inclusion of NGO representatives on the delegation will provide you with an opportunity to educate and influence other members of the delegation on HIV/AIDS and the Special Session.
3. **Push for high-level government representation on your country's delegation to UNGASS.** Try to get your head of government to lead your country's delegation. Tell him or her that this would make a very positive public statement about leadership and commitment. If your head of government will not attend, push for representation at the ministerial level. For a sample letter that you could use to draft your own letter to government leaders, go the ICASO website at <http://www.icaso.org>.
4. **Push for your country to make a major announcement about the response to HIV/AIDS at the time of the Special Session.** When UN Member States gather at the Special Session on June 25-27, 2001 in New York, the attention of the world's media will be focussed on HIV/AIDS. Expectations will be high. Your government will not want to be left out. Push your government to announce increased spending or some other suitable new initiative. Take advantage of this opportunity to lobby for some of the programmes that are at the top of your wish list. If you live in a developed country, you should push your governments to announce higher levels of official development assistance to help countries in need to reduce poverty and achieve sustainable development, and thereby strengthen their capacity to combat HIV/AIDS.
5. **Develop a media strategy.** The media coverage that will occur at the time of the Special Session provides you with an excellent opportunity to get your message out. The media will be looking for local and national angles to the international stories emanating from the UN. Your message can be about the Special Session itself or about HIV/AIDS in your own city or country. Start contacting key people in the media now to get them interested in doing stories in June.
6. **Continue to provide input on UNGASS.** Let people know what you think of the second draft of the Declaration of Commitment, of your country's delegation to UNGASS, etc. Contact the NGO representatives on your country's UNGASS delegation. Contact other NGOs who have been accredited to participate in the Special Session. You can find out who has been accredited on the UNGASS website at: <http://www.un.org/ga/aids>. Participate in Break-the-Silence, the email discussion forum. To join, send a message to join-break-the-silence@hdnet.org.
7. **Start preparing now for the post-UNGASS period.** See separate section below.

5.0 Which Countries Have Included NGO Representatives on Their UNGASS Delegations?

We need more information on which countries have included NGO representatives on their delegations. Please send information on this to Break-the-Silence, with a copy directly to ICASO at icaso@icaso.org Specifically, we would like to know:

1. Does your national delegation to UNGASS include members of civil society organizations (NGOs and PWAs)?
2. If yes, please send names and coordinates.
3. Is your national delegation planning to attend the Second Informal Consultation Meeting on May 21-25, as well as the Special Session on June 25-27?

We are aware that the following countries have included NGO and PWA representatives on their delegations: Australia, Brazil, Canada, Dominican Republic, Philippines, Portugal, Malaysia, Mexico, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, Peru, United Kingdom and Venezuela. We expect that many more countries will soon announce NGO and PWA representation on their national delegations.

6.0 How Should You React to the Next Draft of the Declaration of Commitment?

The next draft will be released around May 14, 2001. Let your country's UNGASS delegation know what you think. If you like what you see, send a letter of endorsement to the members of your country's UNGASS delegation. If you do not like the next draft, or if you think it needs to be strengthened in places, continue to make your views known to members of your country's delegation and other NGOs. Keep pressing them. Use the report from the Geneva meeting (*Comments on the Draft Declaration*) as a reference document.

7.0 What Will Happen at the Second Informal Consultation Meeting in May?

The Second Informal Consultation Meeting in New York, on May 21-25, 2001 is a meeting of country delegations. It is mainly for the purpose of discussing the second draft of the Declaration of Commitment. The meeting is not open to civil society, except for those NGO representatives who are part of country delegations.

However, two other events are scheduled for that week involving civil society:

Civil Society Parallel Session, May 21-22

The Parallel Session will provide civil society representatives with opportunities to review the second draft of the Declaration and to consider and plan other activities, particularly meeting with various country delegations. This session is open to NGO representatives on the country

delegations and to any other NGO representatives who are present in New York on these dates (whether or not they are accredited to UNGASS). ICASO will facilitate this session. The session will start at 09:00 on Monday, May 21. It will be held in Labouisse Hall at UNICEF, East 44th Street (between 1st and 2nd Avenues).

NOTE: If you are planning to participate in this session, please advise Ben Plumley at plumleyb@unaids.org or Sam Avrett at savrett@aol.com.

Also, NGO and PWA representatives who are part of their national delegations are requested to attend the meeting, even if for only a short time, in order to plan how we can best interact during this informal consultation.

Dialogue Session with Member States, May 23, 10:00 – 13:00

The President of the General Assembly has agreed to suspend the Second Informal Consultation Meeting for a few hours to allow representatives of Member States to hold a dialogue session with NGOs. A similar session was held during the First Informal Consultation Meeting last February-March and was well received by all parties. This session is open to civil society participants who are accredited to UNGASS or who have applied for accreditation. This session will provide an opportunity for civil society representatives to present and discuss their consolidated comments on the draft Declaration. Special one-day passes to the United Nations Headquarters will be issued by UNAIDS.

NOTE: If you are planning to participate in this session, please advise Ben Plumley at plumleyb@unaids.org or Sam Avrett at savrett@aol.com.

8.0 What Will Happen at the Special Session in June?

During the Special Session, there will be plenary sessions involving all delegations. There will also be four smaller round table discussions, one on each of the following topics:

Round Table 1 – HIV Prevention and Care

Including:

- Development of microbicides
- Improved access to care and treatment (including drugs)
- Improved health infrastructures
- Scientific research
- Vaccine development

Round Table 2 – Human Rights and HIV/AIDS

Including:

- HIV/AIDS stigma
- Gender specific impacts of HIV/AIDS (especially women and girls, but including men and men who have sex with men)

Round Table 3 – The Social and Economic Impact of the Epidemic and the Strengthening of National Capacities to Combat HIV/AIDS

Including:

- Development of national action plans
- Organizational survival of key governmental and civil society institutions in high-incidence countries
- HIV/AIDS as a security issue

Round Table 4 – International Funding and Cooperation

Including:

- Debt relief
- Expanded public/civil society sector partnerships (including pharmaceutical industry)

It is expected that the final Declaration of Commitment will be adopted during the plenary session. For the most part, participation in the plenary sessions will be limited to country delegations, so NGOs representatives will only be able to attend if they are part of these delegations. In addition, a small number of NGO representatives will be invited to address the plenary session.

The round tables are open to country delegations and a limited number of representatives of accredited NGOs. There will be a number of satellite meetings, before during and after UNGASS, many of which will be organized by NGOs or will involve NGOs.

Funding support to attend the June Session:

It is expected that limited funds will be made available so that some accredited NGOs from developing countries can participate in the June session. More details should be available shortly.

9.0 What are New York-Based Groups Doing to Prepare for the Special Session?

Approximately 100 civil society organisations and advocates based in New York have been working to prepare for the Special Session. In addition to contributing a range of advocacy perspectives to the global Break-the-Silence e-forum discussion, New York civil society organisations have been working to:

- ❑ identify funding for travel and support of visiting civil society delegates;
- ❑ inform people with HIV about the current U.S. travel restrictions and the U.S. travel waiver for UNGASS;
- ❑ inform civil society delegates about other travel considerations related to HIV and the Special Session in New York;
- ❑ establish hotline and service information for visitors; and
- ❑ establish early contact and several meeting “hubs” and resources for visiting civil society groups.

New York organisations and advocates have been encouraged to post all ideas and planning meetings on the global Break-the-Silence discussion forum. Planned events are being posted on

Break-the-Silence as arrangements are finalised. Event organising and advocacy affinity groups have been established on each of the following topics: HIV treatment and health care access, global resources and financing, HIV clinical care and health care provision, HIV research and development, MTCT prevention, microbicides, vaccines, faith-based initiatives, gender and HIV, youth and HIV, injection drug use and harm reduction, HIV-related stigma, human rights and immigration and migration. As well, an African and African/Caribbean affinity group and a Latin American affinity group have been established.

For a full contact list of New York civil society organisations who have expressed an interest in being involved with Special Session activities, contact Sam Avrett at the UNAIDS Liaison Office in New York at savrett@aol.com.

10.0 What Should Happen Post-UNGASS?

NGOs should start planning now for what happens after UNGASS. If the Declaration of Commitment that comes out of the Special Session is a strong and progressive document, NGOs may be able to use it as a powerful advocacy tool. Here are some tips for how you might approach this:

- ❑ Ask your government to organize a meeting with major NGOs to review the accomplishments of the Special Session.
- ❑ At that meeting, press your government to act on the commitments included in the Declaration of Commitment.
- ❑ Organize a media conference where prominent NGO leaders call on the government to implement the contents of the Declaration of Commitment in your country.
- ❑ In future, when an HIV/AIDS issue arises in your country, use the Declaration of Commitment to back up whatever position you are taking.

Copies of Key Documents

You can obtain a copy of this document, plus copies of two earlier documents on the UNGASS process on the website of ICASO at <http://www.icaso.org>.

You can obtain a copy of the draft Declaration of Commitment on the website that the UN has set up for this special session at <http://www.un.org/ga/aids>.

You can obtain a copy of the document that came out of the Geneva meeting of NGOs (April 25-27, 2001) – *Comments on the Draft Declaration of Commitment for the United Nations General Assembly Special Session (UNGASS) on HIV/AIDS* – on the website of ICASO at <http://www.icaso.org>.

You can obtain a copy of the summary of the feedback on Break-the-Silence (to May 1, 2001) on the website of Health Development Networks at <http://www.hdnet.org>.