

Outcome Statement by the High Level Group for the Eastern and Southern Africa
Commitment

Commitment on comprehensive sexuality education and health services for adolescents and young people in Eastern and Southern Africa

We, members of the High Level Group for the Eastern and Southern Africa (ESA) Ministerial Commitment met in Gaborone, Botswana, on 30-31 July 2013 to discuss recent progress, as well as urgent and challenging issues facing adolescents and young people in our region – issues that include HIV, sexuality education, sexual and reproductive health, rights and services. Together we have reviewed and debated the findings in a forthcoming regional report. This report presents a picture of significant progress but also challenging realities. We have noted important development gains including improved access to education, a levelling off in the incidence of new HIV infections in some countries and the benefits of increased access to treatment for adolescents and young people living with HIV. At the same time, we see that HIV knowledge levels remain below 40% overall, girls and young women still struggle to access and complete secondary education, an estimated 52 young people (aged 15-24) are newly infected with HIV every hour in the region; numbers of unintended pregnancies and unsafe abortions are high and maternal mortality is the leading cause of death for women aged between 15 and 24 in this region. We see these as urgent challenges that compel us all to look for opportunities to urgently change this situation, now and in the near future.

All young people have the right to live full and healthy lives. As men and women, parents, young people, teachers, health service providers, development professionals and faith leaders in this region, we take on the shared responsibility for empowering adolescents and young people to live in today's world and to be prepared for life in the future. Increasingly, this is a world with confusing and conflicting messages about gender, sexuality, tradition and modernity. At the same time, there are also strong and inspiring messages rooted in our shared cultural values of family, community, faith and solidarity. We have a duty to prepare adolescents and young people for the reality of the contemporary world through appropriate education and skills, and to fulfill the right to appropriate education and health services.

We, as experts in health, education, rights and development know that education and health are mutually reinforcing. We note with concern that there are critical gaps in access to high quality sexuality education and services for adolescents and young people.

Adolescents and young people in this region require good quality, gender-sensitive sexuality education that prepares them for puberty, relationships, and decisions about their sexual

behaviour that can prevent HIV and unintended pregnancy. They require education that develops values and skills that empower adolescents and young people to decide, if, when and with whom they want to begin sexual relationships that are safe and mutually consensual. Parents and families are critical in this process. At the same time, we are convinced that it is through the trusted voices of their teachers in the school environment and other young leaders that young people will learn most effectively.

Education alone is not sufficient. Adolescents and young people also need access to essential health services, including contraception, confidential HIV and STI testing, HIV prevention, treatment and care, safe pregnancy and delivery, and safe options in the case of unintended pregnancy. These services need to be delivered without judgement and in a way that is accessible and affordable for adolescents and young people.

Along with comprehensive sexuality education and sexual and reproductive health services, we need to promote an environment where all forms of violence and - particularly gender-based violence - are not tolerated, where child marriage is fully prohibited in law and custom, where laws do not constitute a barrier to the realization of good health, and where we are prepared to re-examine our norms and practices which may be undermining the future health and wellbeing of this generation.

We urge leaders in this region, those with responsibility for the education and health of adolescents and young people to be bold in your leadership. Take this moment to reflect on the commitments you have made on education, HIV, SRH and services and how they impact on the rights of adolescents and young people. We urge you to make a commitment to action to scale-up the delivery of comprehensive sexuality education and sexual and reproductive health services and we commit ourselves to working with you to ensure that our region's adolescents and young people are ready for today and tomorrow.

Endorsed by members of the High Level Group

31 July 2013, Gaborone, Botswana

The High Level Group is chaired by Professor Sheila Tlou, Director of the UNAIDS Regional Support Team for Eastern and Southern Africa. For information on members of the HLG please see [here](#).

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