

HIV and AIDS Data Hub for Asia Pacific: a regional tool to support strategic information needs

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The 2011 global commitments towards controlling HIV made by Asia-Pacific countries require considerable improvement in strategic information and response tracking. The HIV and AIDS Data Hub can serve as an important tool for stakeholders with its regional database of subnational indicators, web site and data synthesis capacity.

REGIONAL COMMITMENTS AND HIV STRATEGIC INFORMATION NEEDS

In 2011, countries across the world – including those in Asia and the Pacific – made bold new commitments towards the elimination of HIV, including several specific targets to be met by 2015.^{1–4}

In Asia and the Pacific, the renewed commitments are warranted by the estimated 4.8 million people living with HIV (14% of global infections) and the second highest death toll after Sub-Saharan Africa, with an estimated 310 000 AIDS-related deaths.⁵ The need to reach new targets by 2015 means, more than ever, that countries will have to prioritize understanding the progression of their HIV epidemics. Regular systems need to be in place for tracking trends and remedying gaps. Since epidemics in the region tend to be concentrated among key populations at higher risk, and are geographically disparate within countries, there is a need for better subnational data generation and analyses so that responses can prioritize appropriate groups and localities. Central and subnational data synthesis and triangulation units involving technical experts, policy-makers and communities are essential. Using resources effectively demands greater coordination among development partners and national partners in HIV interventions and guidance on new developments such as Treatment for

Prevention and the Investment Framework.^{6,7} There is already substantial regional experience in effective responses that reverse the epidemic. Increased sharing of lessons and innovative approaches among countries would be highly beneficial.

However, gaps still exist in HIV and behaviour surveillance, monitoring and evaluation and/or their quality and in subsequent analysis of data to guide programming. One-third of 26 countries assessed in Asia and the Pacific conducted HIV sentinel surveillance surveys among all their relevant key populations (sex workers, men who have sex with men, people who inject drugs) between 2008 and 2012; two-thirds of the 26 countries had done behavioural surveys. Although size estimations of key populations are now more available (20/24 countries assessed), questions remain in countries about their reliability. The proportion of AIDS spending on interventions among key populations is still low (median of 6% reported by 14 countries).⁸ Comparisons of country progress are hampered by diverse data collection methods and indicators, often tailored to meet reporting needs rather than inform programming. In many countries there is still a gap whereby strategic information generated by data analysts is not translated into key messages for policy-makers. Communities often do not have the evidence to participate in decision-making.

In this environment, there is need for a regional tool to support national and international partners with updated HIV data for policy advocacy and tracking of progress. The regional HIV and AIDS Data Hub for Asia-Pacific, with its openly accessible web site that is linked to a regional database and team of data analysts, is in a unique position to fill this role.⁹

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EVOLUTION OF DATA HUB FROM PROJECT TO SUSTAINABLE REGIONAL DATA RESOURCE

Initiated in 2006 by the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) East Asia and Pacific Regional Office (EAPRO), Asian Development Bank and the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) Regional Support Team for Asia-Pacific (RSTAP) to promote evidence-informed advocacy and action, the web site was launched in 2008. The Data Hub also received technical support from World Health Organization (WHO) and the Fogarty Programme, University of California, Los Angeles. A Science and Technical Advisory Group of HIV experts guided early development and provided information and data validation. Technical and operational development was managed by EAPRO until 2011.

The three major aspects comprising the Data Hub are the regional database, data analysis team and web site with data products (Figure 1). Data are collected from published literature and national HIV web sites and from a network of country and regional partners. Data are vetted for accuracy and valid methods and conclusions by the team before being included in the regional database. The Data Hub, with its focus on subnational information on key populations and affected women and children, with gender- and age-disaggregated data where available, complements the global standardized

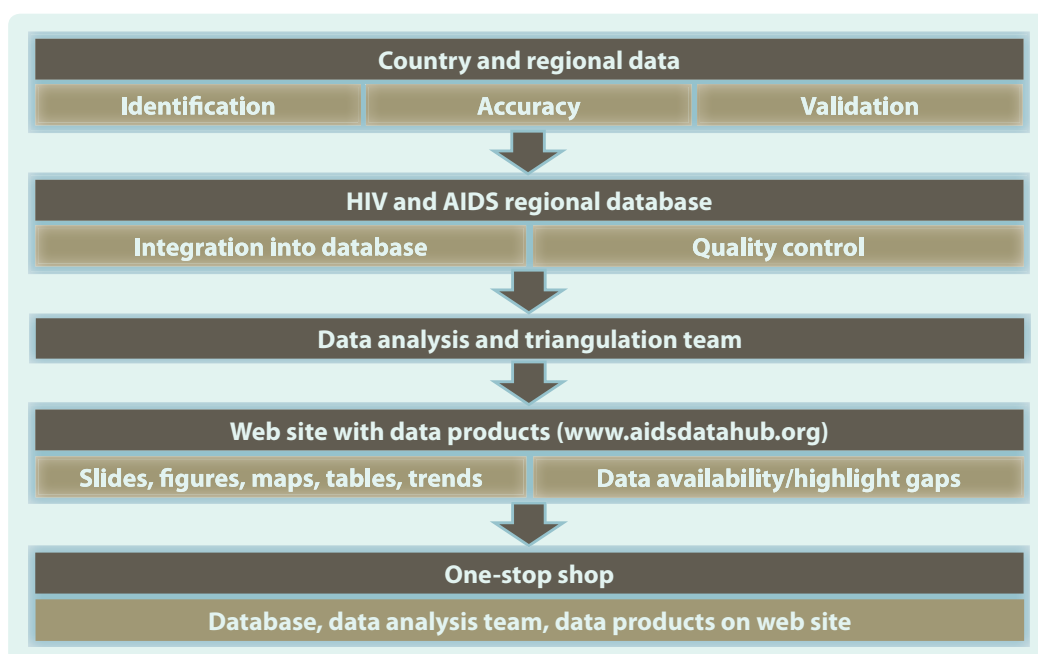
United Nations General Assembly Special Session (UNGASS) and health sector data.

The Data Hub team responds specifically to regional needs by compiling the epidemic and response-related data on Asian countries and the Pacific to generate useful strategic information products. These are downloadable on the web site and increasingly commissioned through direct communications with partners.

The web portal is the only regional site of its kind, with a large repository of data on 26 countries. The regional database now has 86 000 data points for 1400 indicators on HIV prevalence, vulnerability, risk behaviours, national response and socioeconomic impact collected from over 900 unique sources. The web site has a comprehensive online reference library with over 2500 downloadable documents. Also available are downloadable data spread sheets; country reviews of synthesized strategic information; thematic regional reviews; slides on “Data Availability,” “Economics of AIDS;” key information and maps; key presentations by experts; and a section for common tools, guidelines and training manuals. Over 10 000 unique visitors made approximately 15 000 visits to the site during the first quarter of 2012.

There are many examples of how the Data Hub products and/or the expertise of the data analysis team

Figure 1. How the HIV and AIDS Data Hub for Asia-Pacific works to generate strategic information products



add value to regional reports and key events that aim to improve HIV responses. The Data Hub has become an important reference source for UNAIDS cosponsors and civil society regional networks seeking data on specific themes or validation of data and for developing presentations for regional events. In collaboration with UNAIDS RSTAP, the data analysis team collated and analysed data for the regional report, "HIV in Asia and the Pacific: Getting to Zero." In February 2012, the Data Hub provided the strategic information for the regional brief and overview presentations at the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) Asia-Pacific High-Level Intergovernmental Meeting.

At the country level, several National AIDS Programme web sites provide a link to the Data Hub web site. The Nepal National Centre for AIDS and STI Control used Data Hub products in their 2010 Country UNGASS Progress Report.

In 2011, partners commissioned a Data Hub Management Review to further increase its benefit for the region and to examine sustainability options. The Review acknowledged the Data Hub as a useful strategic information resource and made the following important recommendations on future directions within a three-year business plan:

- Adopting an ecosystem approach to involve regional partners (United Nations cosponsors, development and national partners, community networks, civil society and nongovernmental and private sector organizations) in a network using the platform to profile relevant information and evidence to guide responses. EAPRO has demonstrated the benefit of this approach by hosting the Asia Pacific Prevention of Parent to Child Transmission Task Force webpage on the Data Hub, which largely used data and slides prepared by the Data Hub at its launch.
- Concentrating on the regional focus and support to multi-country initiatives, with a shift from current products that anticipate regional and national partners needs to those that specifically meet expressed data requirements, with increased data triangulation and epidemic modelling.

- Providing a forum for the wealth of qualitative information generated by communities most affected by HIV.
- Tapping into the immense new technological potential to support data use, including interactive applications, data reporting and management tools.
- Facilitating the transition to a sustainable regional platform by having UNAIDS RSTAP host the platform due to its convening role in HIV strategic information and partnerships.

Now managed through UNAIDS RSTAP, the Data Hub will capitalize on its established position as the one-stop shop for subnational data and value-added analysis on HIV and AIDS in Asia and the Pacific by broadening its partnerships to increase its potential as an effective tool for stakeholders in measuring progress to limit the HIV epidemic by 2015.

Conflicts of interest

The authors are all part of the Data Hub data analysis team and this article was undertaken as part of routine activities.

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