



HIV prevention activities in Laos. Photo: IOM 2008

## HIV and Population Mobility

IOM is committed to the principle that humane and orderly migration benefits migrants and society. As an intergovernmental body, IOM acts with its partners in the international community to: assist in meeting the operational challenges of migration, advance understanding of migration issues, encourage social and economic development through migration, and work towards effective respect of the human dignity and well-being of migrants.

Migrants and mobile populations are increasingly an important key target population for HIV and AIDS activities in many countries. They may be among most-at-risk populations or they may also be an important target population in their own right. Migrants often include a mix of diverse populations such as immigrants from particular countries, ethnic minorities, emigrants in overseas work, internal migrants, victims of exploitation and abuse, irregular migrants and displaced persons. Such sub-populations have varying levels of HIV risk and vulnerability. HIV policies and programmes targeting migrants as a whole are ineffective. The HIV vulnerability of migrants is also linked to much more than knowledge about HIV transmission and the effects of mobility, often including structural factors such as poverty, ability to access health services overall, and gender-based violence.

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) works within a rights-based framework to increase the access of migrants and mobile populations to HIV prevention, care, support and treatment, while assisting countries to manage the health impacts of population mobility. IOM HIV projects often focus on “Spaces of Vulnerability” where migrant and mobile populations interact with local communities in environments conducive to multiple concurrent partnership or higher-risk sex, such as land border posts, ports, construction sites, mines, and farm compounds. IOM uses a combination prevention approach, while at the same time working to ensure that migrants and local populations are able to access health services.





Over the past five years, IOM has implemented more than 200 HIV projects comprising more than 27 million USD. IOM has served as Principle Recipient of a project funded by the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, TB, and Malaria and has received funding from a broad range of partners including UNAIDS and other UN agencies; and a wide range of governments. Beneficiaries of IOM HIV projects include regular and irregular migrant workers across a range of sectors such as transport, agriculture, mining, maritime, and infrastructure; mobile populations in crisis settings such as internally displaced persons and refugees; families and partners of migrants including sex workers; as well as victims of sexual and gender-based violence and trafficking in persons.

**IOM's global programme on HIV has the following objectives:**

#### **Service Delivery and Capacity Building**

- **To facilitate, provide and promote equitable access to comprehensive HIV prevention, care, treatment and support services for migrants and mobile populations throughout the migration process**
- **To reduce the risk of HIV infection among migrants and sedentary populations in “spaces of vulnerability” through combination prevention interventions**

#### **Advocacy for Policy Development**

- **To advocate for regional, national and multi-sectoral policies that contribute to the improved standard of physical, mental and social well-being of migrants, including migrants living with HIV**
- **To facilitate a conducive environment for policy development through increased awareness of and support for the importance of addressing migration health in regional, national and multi-sectoral policies and legislation, including sexual and reproductive health and rights**
- **To advocate for harmonized public health-, and rights-based policies in all sectors**

#### **Research and Information Dissemination**

- **To strengthen the understanding of the intersections between HIV and population mobility through increased epidemiological and behavioural data on specific migrant populations**
- **To improve standardization and comparability of data on migrant health, and to improve monitoring of migrants' health-seeking behaviours, access and utilization of services**
- **To mainstream migration health into the research agenda and national and regional statistical plans**

## **HIV and Population Mobility**

Despite increasing interest in the health and human rights of migrants, and particular attention to HIV on the part of origin and destination countries, the links between migration, population mobility and HIV are still not widely understood. In 2001 IOM collaborated with the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) to publish a Technical Update on Population Mobility and AIDS as part of the UNAIDS Best Practice Collection. At that time existing evidence and research focused mostly on the potential impact of mobility on the risk behaviour of a migrant, due to reduced community cohesion, weakened social norms, and time away from family. Additional research and programme experience over the past 10 years on migration health generally, and on HIV among migrants in particular, has informed IOM's current approach (see below). More research and evidence is needed however; in many settings migrants are not included in national plans and strategies, and disaggregated information on migrants' health is often not available at the national level.

Lack of common definitions and a tendency to generalize about migrants as though they were a homogeneous group also contribute to the complexities. Migrants often include a mix of diverse populations such as immigrants from particular countries, ethnic minorities, emigrants in overseas work, internal migrants, victims of exploitation and abuse, irregular migrants and displaced persons. These sub-populations have varying levels of HIV risk and vulnerability. Any HIV policy or programme targeting migrants as a whole is not effective, and may contribute to the stigmatization of migrants as “carriers” of HIV, a persistent and common myth. Further challenges relate to persistent stigma and discrimination about migrants and HIV, in some cases contributing to legislation and policies contrary to public health, such as in the case of HIV entry, stay and residence restrictions.



Transport corridor in Eastern Africa, Mpondwe at the Uganda-Congo border. Photo: IOM 2009

### “Spaces of Vulnerability” Approach

There is increased focus on migrants and mobile populations as key target populations for HIV and AIDS activities in many countries. They may be among most-at-risk populations (e.g. mobile sex workers, migrant injecting drug users, migrant men-who-have-sex-with-men) but they may also be an important target population in their own right, depending on the specific factors which contribute to their risk of HIV infection. The HIV vulnerability of migrants is linked to much more than knowledge about HIV transmission and the effects of mobility, often including structural factors such as poverty, inability to access health services overall, and gender-based violence. Research indicates that in some settings migrants have a higher HIV prevalence than local communities, while in other settings local populations face higher risk of HIV infection than migrants. Based on this research and on-the-ground programmatic experience, IOM is increasingly focusing on “Spaces of Vulnerability” where migrant and mobile populations interact with local communities in environments conducive to multiple concurrent partnership or higher-risk sex. In places such as land border posts, ports, construction sites, mines, and farm compounds, mobile workers are linked through sexual networks to their partners at home, their partners on their journey, and their partners in the site of destination. These networks stretch across regions, connecting low and high prevalence HIV epidemics, different levels of sexual and HIV education, and one vulnerable space to another. IOM focuses on Spaces of Vulnerability using a combination prevention approach, while at the same time working to ensure that migrants and local populations are able to access health services. IOM works with governments and other partners to help assess which migrants may be at risk in particular settings and to develop effective responses.

**For more information and key resources please visit the  
[HIV and Population Mobility webpage at  
 http://www.iom.int](http://www.iom.int)**