The National Response to HIV/AIDS:
Bangladesh

Aktari Mantaz
Senior Assistant secretary & Desk Officer of HIV/AIDS Programme
Ministry of Health and Family Welfare
Government of Bangladesh
Introduction

Bangladesh is one of the smallest as well as the poorest countries of the world. It looks like a small dot in the world map. Its area is 1,47,570 square kilometres with a population of about 122.80 millions having a density of 755 per square kilometre - the highest in the world. Notwithstanding its all out efforts to mobilise internal resources, the Government of Bangladesh has to depend largely on foreign loan and aid in its development efforts to ensure at least a decent living for this huge population. This will indeed remain as the greatest challenge for all governments to come in foreseeable future. People are still struggling against poverty, malnutrition, and illiteracy.

The National Response to HIV/AIDS:

The govt. of Bangladesh (GOB) being conscious of the gravity of the situation, initiated all possible measures against HIV/AIDS with effect from 1985 when the first National AIDS Committee (NAC) was constituted to provide necessary policy guidance on scientific, technical, medical and other HIV/AIDS related matters. The NAC was defined as an advisory body with responsibility for major policy issues and strategies; coordination of different sectors including NGOs; supervision of programmes and mobilisation of resources.

In 1987, GOB began initiating AIDS prevention activities with technical assistance of WHO, Global Programmes on AIDS (GPS). The activities began under a "Short Term Plan" (STP) which focused on determining HIV/AIDS prevalence and in developing prevention and control measures, particularly in the health sector. During 1989, three years "Medium Term Plan" (MTP) was formulated and prevention activities were carried out with WHO support in areas of surveillance; laboratory diagnosis; and strengthening technical, financial health education and management capabilities.

Since 1996, UNDP supported project - "Bangladesh AIDS Prevention and Control Programme" has supported the national programme through a process of formulating the policy, strategic plan and plan of action. In the last year alone (1996-1997) several concrete steps have been taken by the GOB and its development partners regarding HIV/AIDS.

Policy on the National Response to HIV/AIDS:

In May 1997 the GOB approved the national policy on HIV/AIDS and STD related issues on which governmental and non-governmental organisations, civil society and donors had worked together. It outlines the various and numerous aspects of HIV/AIDS prevention and care that must be addressed in a comprehensive national programme and plan of action. The document covers public health aspects such as surveillance, safe blood supply, HIV counselling and testing, diagnosis and treatment of sexually transmitted disease. It also addressed the particular vulnerability of woman, adolescents and children; mobility; inter venous drug use; ethical aspects of AIDS; research; HIV/AIDS and the work place; information, education, communication; social and
behavioural research; and legal issues related to HIV/AIDS. One of most important feature of the document is its attention to the protection of human rights in relation to HIV/AIDS.

To carry out these specific objectives and strategies, the national programme has been assigned to several task formulating bodies with individual membership make-up and terms of references. The committees are:

National AIDS Committee (NAC)

A multi-sectoral body with a strong political commitment. It is an advisory body to the govt. of Bangladesh which oversees all the aspects related to HIV/AIDS and STDs.

Technical Committee of the National AIDS Committee

The Technical Committee is a body of experts supervising technical aspects of HIV/AIDS/STDs prevention and control and is the technical arm of the National AIDS Committee. In addition the Technical Committee provides technical support to the Co-ordination Committee.

Co-ordination Committee

This group of body performs as the link to the tripartite coalition of NAC, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare and Director General of health services for smooth functioning in policy formulation and implementation. It consists of co-ordinators of surveillance, counselling, health education, blood transfusion, sterilisation, nursing, case management, laboratories, primary health care and reproductive health services.

The above mentioned groups or bodies form the backbone of the HIV/AIDS and STD Prevention and Control Programme in Bangladesh. In addition to this, NGOs and the private sector form a vast non-formal sector in collaborating, assisting and complementing the strategies and programmes enacted by the Tripartite Coalition in connection with the AIDS/STD programmes.

National Strategic Plan:

In may 1997, the government NGOs, representatives of various communities in Bangladesh and donors developed the strategic plan for the National AIDS Programme of Bangladesh 1997-2002. This plan focuses on four major strategies for HIV/AIDS prevention and care. These strategies are to:

- reduce HIV/STD transmission through sex, through blood and infected skin piercing instruments such as needles and syringes, and from mother to their children during pregnancy, at birth and through breast feeding;
- Reduce those situations and environments that generate and foster risk of transmission;
- Reduce personal, social and economic impact of HIV/AIDS/STD; and
Mobilise a national, regional and international response to threat of STD/HIV/AIDS.

Strategic Framework for the National Aids Programme:

**GOAL:**
To Reduce the Spread of HIV and the Impact of AIDS

- Reduce Transmission of HIV and STDs through Sexual, Blood and IDUs
- Reduce Risk Generating Environments
- Reduce Personal, Economic and Social Impact of AIDS
- Mobilise National, Regional and International Response to the Threat of AIDS

Cross-Cutting Issues:
Gender, Human Rights, BCC/IEC, and Research, Monitoring and Evaluation

Operational Plan for National STD/AIDS Programme 1998-1999:

An Operational Plan for National AIDS/STD programme 1998-1999 has been prepared by the Ministry of Health in April this year, in cooperation with UNAIDS-Bangladesh. The operational plan is prepared in the framework of the Health and Population Sector Programme (HPSP). The aim of HPSP is to provide a package of essential health care services for the people of Bangladesh. The HPSP intends to promote services responsive to the population needs. A feature of HPSP is the transition from a project driven approach to programme approach, which links a sector-wide policy framework to an implementation and expenditure plan for the health sector. The prevention and care of AIDS epidemics have been included in the Essential Services Package (ESP) which consists of basic reproductive and child health services including family planning, maternal care and immunisation as well as control of selected communicable diseases, limited curative care and behaviour change communication (BCC). The ESP will be delivered through different levels of the primary health care system.

The structure called the National AIDS/STD Programme (NA/SP) has succeeded BAPCP. This NA/SP is based under the directorate of primary healthcare and headed by a programme manager (See Annexure-1).
The NA/SP will direct AIDS/STD activities implementation through:

- Providing guidelines on national priorities and assistance with planning
- Reviewing and updating national standards for training and interventions to support HIV/AIDS/STD prevention and care.
- Providing technical assistance to institutionalise new/strengthen existing health services/facilities and information systems to service providers.
- Estimating equipment/supply needs and facilitating procurements and logistics.
- Mobilising support for participation in the programme.
- Contracting relevant organisations for surveillance and monitoring the implementation progress.
- Reporting on progress and constraints to the line directors responsible for operations.
- Reviewing and realising programming needs.

The main focus of the National AIDS/STD Programme will be on Behaviour Change Communication (BCC) and condom promotion.

The whole world is now facing a threat to a normal healthy life due to HIV/AIDS pandemic, one of the greatest medical tragedies of this century. WHO estimates that 18 million adults and 1.5 million children have been infected by HIV since the beginning of the pandemic. According to WHO about 30 to 40 million men, women and children will be infected with HIV by the end of this century. Already, over 4.5 million individuals infected with HIV have developed AIDS. By the end of this century, developing countries will account for over 90% of all people with HIV infection. It is estimated that in the year 2000, 5 to 10 million children might lose their mother or both parents. The pressing need is to look for urgent and immediate responses that are required from everybody on this most emerging issue in their own ways.