**2017 Human Rights Council Social Forum**

**Panel 6: Building synergies for health: engaging diverse partners**

**Statement by Mr. Dzmitry Subtselny, Belarussian Association of UNESCO clubs, Belarus**

***Cross-sectoral cooperation in Belarus: HIV prevention, testing, treatment and human rights***

Madam moderator, Ladies and Gentlemen!

In the context of the general topic of the Social Forum, I would like to say that HIV-service organizations of Belarus not only acknowledge the principles of synergy and cross-sectoral cooperation, but have been actively working in this direction for many years.

Time presents new challenges for all actors in the global campaign against HIV infection, which can be addressed only through cooperation and joint efforts.

In recent years, the Republic of Belarus has made significant progress in the fight against HIV infection, but there is still much work to be done.

The defining principles of the national policy for the prevention of HIV/AIDS are: a single strategy, which is a Sub-Program "Prevention of HIV Infection" of the State Program "People's Health and Demographic Security of the Republic of Belarus" for 2016-2020; a single intersectoral coordinating body, which is the Country Coordinating Committee for Cooperation with the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria; and a single national system for monitoring and evaluating the HIV/AIDS situation.

The Republic of Belarus has made significant progress in providing access to prevention, treatment and care of HIV infection and ensuring progress in achieving the objectives outlined in the Millennium Declaration (2000), the Declaration of Commitment on HIV/AIDS (2001), the Dublin Declaration on Partnership to Fight HIV/AIDS in Europe and Central Asia (2004), the Political Declaration on HIV/AIDS (2011).

Progress in this area is primarily achieved due to political support and sustained funding for national HIV/AIDS responses and interventions, which have been implemented since 2004 with significant support from the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. Funding for HIV/AIDS activities from the state budget has more than tripled over the past decade.

Currently, around 19 000 people with HIV infection live in our country, of which more than 9200 people are treated with antiretroviral therapy.

The Republic of Belarus has established a legislative framework regulating the work in the field of HIV/AIDS prevention and containing requirements for maintaining the confidentiality of information about the HIV status of the patient. The main legal acts are: the Law of the Republic of Belarus "On Healthcare" and the Law of the Republic of Belarus "On the Prevention of the Spread of Socially Dangerous Diseases, HIV".

In order to improve the training of health workers and increase their awareness of confidentiality, the legal acts regulating the work in the field of HIV/AIDS prevention are included in the training programs of higher and secondary medical educational institutions, as well as training institutions for doctors, secondary medical personnel and laboratory workers.

Medical records containing any information about HIV-positive patients and correspondence between healthcare organizations are allocated in a separate section on records management "For Official Use" and are only brought to the attention of medical personnel directly providing medical care.

The current legislation provides for criminal liability for disclosure of information about the HIV status of the patient.

HIV infection in Belarus is on its concentrated stage and spread to a greater extent among vulnerable groups, such as injecting drug users (about 25%), commercial sex workers (about 7%), and men who have sex with men (about 6%).

Of course, a major role in the country in the field of prevention and treatment is played by state structures, such as Ministries of Health and Education, but civil society organizations and the UN system organizations also play the important role in these processes, especially in the context of human rights advocacy. All the work with commercial sex workers and men who have sex with men, as well as most of the work with the injecting drug users is carried out by NGOs.

*Access to vulnerable groups of the population is significantly limited for specialists of public health organizations. Because of fear of revealing their HIV-positive status and belonging to vulnerable groups, individuals from these groups have very low motivation to seek medical care. Testing coverage for these populations is well below the recommended level: 26% of the estimated number of injecting drug users, 12% of the estimated number of women involved in sex work and 11% of the estimated number of men who have sex with men. As a result, there are about 10 thousand undetected HIV-infected persons in the country, which provokes a "hidden" spread of HIV. According to estimates, about 5,000 HIV-positive persons do not seek regular medical care and do not receive the necessary treatment. High dependence of the current system on international donor assistance remains the main potential risk in dealing with the groups of the population most vulnerable to HIV. Prevention activities among vulnerable groups are carried out by social organizations exclusively through international technical assistance projects and do not cover existing needs for prevention.*

More than 80 HIV-service public associations currently work in the Republic of Belarus, the largest 16 of them are united in a national network of HIV-service organizations.

The general activities of these organizations are:

* rising awareness on prevention of HIV, STIs, drug abuse, formation of positive behaviors, promotion of healthy lifestyles among youth;
* harm reduction;
* prevention of HIV infection and STIs among vulnerable population groups, formation of adherence to antiretroviral therapy;
* realization of research;
* human rights protection and advocacy for vulnerable populations.

In addition to the basic forms and methods of work, interactive methods and online technologies have become increasingly popular in recent years.

Work through the Internet is a priority area of work for public associations. On the one hand, the work in the Internet is cost-effective, and on the other, it allows them to reach target groups that cannot be covered through the outreach work.

For example, more than 5 years the website of Belarusian Association of UNESCO Clubs www.belau.info contains a portal of e-learning, allowing anyone to improve his or her personal and professional competence in the field of HIV infection. The portal was created to expand access for volunteers, professionals working with young people, outreach workers to knowledge and methodologies for HIV prevention.

Such courses are especially in demand among volunteers and specialists from small towns and rural areas of the Republic of Belarus.

With regard to cross-sectoral cooperation, synergy, we can say that in our country such relations have been built since 1998.

Currentlyy, there are several platforms for such cooperation. Country Coordination Committee for the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria consists of more than 40 representatives of governmental, non-governmental, international, religious, commercial organizations, people living with HIV and individuals form vulnerable groups. This is an extremely important platform. Besides, cooperation in the country is built through the work of Advisory Board on Monitoring and Evaluation, regional interagency councils, electronic platforms for training and information exchange.

The civil society organisations in Belarus also do an important work in the context of human rights:

* for commercial sex workers, men who have sex with men and injecting drug users, anonymously-consulting offices and mobile services work in many regions of the country;
* for commercial sex workers, the hotline for legal issues exists, and specific mobile app is being developed;
* round tables and meetings on commercial sex workers advocacy are held in the regions with participation of the Ministry of Internal Affairs representatives;
* for all groups there is a possibility of anonymous examination and treatment of HIV/ STIs, for the commercial sex workers there is a possibility to improve living conditions and to get an in-demand job;
* for young people older than 14 years, there is a possibility of anonymous HIV testing;
* for people living with HIV, there is a monitoring of access to antiretroviral treatment and issues of interruptions in treatment.

There are many examples of good practices in intersectoral cooperation, and work in this area goes on. One of the most recent and notable practices is the MARA project, implemented in partnership with UNICEF, the Ministry of Health, and NGOs. The project is focused on access to HIV testing and counselling for adolescents at risk. Within the framework of the project, a clear and well-functioning system of interaction was built, redirecting adolescents from social or outreach workers to medical centres and centres of friendly relations with adolescents.

The Belarusian network of HIV-service organizations plans the following activities for the near future:

* activities of the monitoring group, consisting of trained representatives of communities of key populations affected by HIV, to monitor the quality of services provided in the field of HIV / AIDS and respect for the rights of key populations;
* organization of legal support in cases of human rights violations;
* creation of an on-line database for recording cases of human rights violations and legal measures taken;
* roundtables on the presentation of the work of monitoring groups and the development of recommendations for the elimination of revealed violations.

**In conclusion, on behalf of the non-governmental HIV-service organizations of Belarus, I would like to express my gratitude to the UN system organizations and the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria for their great contribution to the sustainable development of our country and, of course, to HIV-related programmes.**

**I would also like to note that it is important to continue the systematic work of UN agencies in middle-income countries, providing technical and financial support, strengthening and developing cross-sectoral cooperation.**

**After many years of practice, I can conclude that the UN system organizations are a reliable bridge between NGOs and state bodies.**