A PARTNERSHIP TO SAVE LIVES

The fight against the HIV and AIDS scourge has taken a notch up to include linking Sexual Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) and HIV as three concerned parties signing a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) in Gaborone recently. The parties to this MOU are the Government of Botswana (through Ministry of Health, the European Union (EU) and the United Nations (through the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)).

Botswana is one of the seven Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries who will be benefiting from this EU supported initiative, named the SRHR & HIV Linkages Project. “The European Union supports the global efforts to link SRHR and HIV as there is growing evidence suggesting that better linking of efforts in addressing SRHR and HIV produces mutually reinforcing progress in both areas, which is essential to achieve the related Millennium Development Goals (MDGs),” Ambassador Gerard McGovern who heads the delegation of the European Union in Botswana and SADC said in his remarks.

The Ambassador further indicated that a Declaration of the African, Caribbean and Pacific and European Union (ACP-EU) Joint Parliament Assembly is evidence to the recognition that this subject is currently receiving. The Declaration calls on the ACP-EU governments to promote the integration of HIV and reproductive, maternal and newborn health services as a key measure to achieving the MDGs by 2015. In that regard, particular attention should be paid to strengthening health and community systems to deliver effective integration of SRHR and HIV programmes.

The 2006 Maputo Plan of Action (MaPoA) was a call by the Ministers of Health from the African Union that SRHR and HIV need to be linked. SADC has also embraced this recognition as a key factor in achieving a 20 per cent target of reducing new HIV infections by the year 2015. “It is a fact that MDGs 4, 5 and 6 (reduce child mortality, improve maternal health & combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases respectively) will not be achieved without ensuring universal access to SRHR and HIV prevention, treatment, care and support” said the Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Health Dr. Kaolatho Malefho.

The SRHR & HIV Linkages project is undertaken as part of strengthening the commitment to achieving universal access to sexual and reproductive health services, recognizing the contribution of these services to HIV prevention and the achievement of the MDGs 4, 5 and 6. Dr Malefho indicated that the 2008 Rapid Assessment of Sexual and Reproductive Health and HIV and AIDS Linkages, conducted in Botswana revealed that “the services available for linkage were limited and that there was considerable room for increasing the availability and the linking of services”.

For her part, the UNFPA Country Representative Aisha Camara-Drammeh said that the project was motivated by the existing evidence that the majority of HIV infections are sexually transmitted or associated with pregnancy, childbirth and breastfeeding as well as urogenital or inflammatory sexually transmitted infections that can affect HIV transmission. “There are only four years remaining to report progress on International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) and the MDGs. However recent research indicates that the achievement of the MDGs may not be realised for many developing countries mainly because of the HIV & AIDS epidemic and poor sexual and reproductive health. Botswana being one of them,” Camara-Drammeh said in her statement. She further highlighted that reinforcing and scaling up linkages between SRHR and HIV was the key to achieving these global targets and goals.

The EU supported SRHR & HIV Linkages Project is scheduled to run for a period of 4 years and Botswana has been allocated about P10 million. The Ministry of Health will lead implementation of the project supported by UNFPA, UNAIDS and WHO. NGOs are also expected to play a key role in the execution of the project.