The findings of APHEDA research into the HIV vulnerabilities of Cambodian entertainment workers were presented at the 19th International AIDS Conference held in Washington DC. The conference also heard encouraging news about the possibility of an AIDS-free future.

APHEDA research presented at major AIDS conference

Union Aid Abroad-APHEDA was represented by Phillip Hazelton, APHEDA Mekong Representative, and Neil Poetschka, former Mekong HIV/AIDS Advisor. The conference brought together 25,000 people from all over the world to attend workshops, presentations, debates and protests on all aspects of the fight against HIV/AIDS.

HIV remains a major public health concern. More than 33 million people globally are HIV positive, with 22 million people affected in sub-Saharan Africa and 5 million in Asia. Only 25 percent have access to life saving treatment.

Neil Poetschka presented the results of APHEDA’s research with Cambodian entertainment workers — waitresses, beer sellers, masseuses, and karaoke singers — and their vulnerabilities to HIV. The results reinforced the urgent need for improved wages and conditions, which would reduce the likelihood of entertainment workers engaging in sex work to supplement poor wages, and enforced occupational health and safety provisions to decrease violence, abuse and HIV risk for these workers. The ILO funded the research, and also supported APHEDA’s attendance at the conference.

Delegates at the conference also highlighted the situation of groups considered ‘most-at-risk’ to HIV — such as injecting drug users, sex workers, and men who have sex with men. Government action was demanded to repeal laws and reduce stigma and discrimination against these most-at-risk groups, to provide them with specific health and support services, and to address underlying legal and social issues that perpetuate their vulnerability to HIV.

Stigma, discrimination and punitive laws mean members of most-at-risk groups don’t or can’t access services, and reaching them with prevention and treatment messages and services is difficult. Consequently, campaigns aiming to bring down rates of HIV infection in the general population may have no effect on rates of infection for most-at-risk groups.

The conference also heard, for the first time, encouraging messages about the possibility of a future AIDS-free generation brought about by eliminating ‘vertical’ transmission (from mothers to their babies) and the use of treatment as prevention.

The ILO and trade unions focused on the importance of workplace HIV responses, including social protection and the need to recognise sex work as work and provide rights and protection for sex workers — including their right to form trade unions. Also of concern was the growing trend of public-private partnerships, and adequate funding for HIV/AIDS, including funding via a financial transactions tax.

Trade, funding obstacles ahead

New restrictive trade agreements being negotiated with India could lead to the unnecessary deaths of large numbers of people with HIV. India provides 80 percent of all antiretroviral drugs used by people living with HIV in developing countries — at an average cost of $110 per year per patient. This cost has been reduced from thousands of dollars by collective action against restrictive drug patents.

Equally concerning is the drop in funding for HIV/AIDS responses from international donors. National governments are not taking up the slack in most cases, and certainly not in relation to most-at-risk groups. Unfortunately, just as the world hears about the possibility of getting ahead of the virus, an opportunity seems likely to be missed due to lack of funding.

The 20th International AIDS Conference will be held in Melbourne in July 2014.
Advocacy and elections in Timor-Leste

A few days after Timor-Leste's recent — and largely peaceful — parliamentary election, APHEDA project partners were able to raise the concerns of domestic workers directly with Government representatives.

The 'social dialogue' between members of Timorese civil society and Government representatives focused on the issues facing domestic workers. The Secretary for Professional Development and Employment and the Secretary for the Promotion of Equality met with a number of NGOs including Union Aid Abroad-APHEDA partners: the Working Women's Centre Timor-Leste (WWC-TL); the peak union body, KSTL; Grupo Feto Foins'ae Timor Leste (GFFTL – the East Timor Young Women's Association); and the General Workers Union of Timor-Leste (SJTTL).

Significantly, ten domestic workers from each district participated in the dialogue and they were excited to be able to hear the presentations by the Government representatives and engage with them directly.

WWC-TL shared the information and experiences they had gathered from domestic workers around the country. After the dialogue, WWC-TL Director, Jessica Sequeira, said that WWC-TL will continue to raise public awareness of the issues facing domestic workers and hopes to take the struggle for domestic workers’ rights to a higher level.

In the election, Xanana Gusmao’s party, the National Congress for the Reconstruction of Timor-Leste (CNRT), won 30 seats, while FRETILIN won 25 seats. A coalition government was formed between CNRT, the Democratic Party (PD) and Frente-Mundanca. Prime Minister Xanana Gusmao and the new cabinet were sworn in by President Taur Matan Ruak in early August. ■

Manila under water

The Philippines’ capital and largest city, Manila, and surrounding provinces, were hit by two major typhoons in early August. The subsequent flooding affected an estimated 2.4 million people, with 300,000 people, including APHEDA project participants, displaced by the rising floodwaters.

Manila is situated on a flat coastal plain and when typhoons hit in quick succession - as Typhoons Saola and Haiku did - it can lead to prolonged flooding. As with most catastrophes, it is the poorest who are hardest hit. In Manila, the shanties of the poor are built in the low lying areas most susceptible to flooding.

The flooding affected families who are part of our primary education and OH&S project on the Hapilan garbage dump in the Tondo district of Manila. One of the APHEDA-supported daycare centres was under 30cm of water and 1,600 families had to be evacuated from their homes. Rowena Agaton-Balino, from the Institute for Occupational Health and Safety Development, (IOHSAD) told us that around 150 families were still unable to return to their homes. Since the flooding, IOHSAD has also identified outbreaks of a variety of illnesses including leptospyrosis, dengue and chicken pox.

Health appeal

In early August we started an email appeal to assist another Philippines partner, Community Medicine Development Foundation, to set up temporary health clinics and health services for displaced families. So far over $4,000 has been generously donated. If you would like to contribute please call 1800 888 674 or visit www.apheda.org.au ■

Didn’t receive the appeal email? Please call us 1800 888 674 to check that we have your up-to-date contact details. ■
Project Officer Matt Hilton shares some of the things he has learnt while working with our project partners in the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

Poverty is not a natural state of affairs or simply bad luck. Poverty is created. Our challenge is to work with people and their communities to identify how they are kept poor and how to create change.

Our work with those in developing countries therefore cannot just be about aid, it needs to be complemented by practical solidarity: campaigning, awareness raising, advocacy and exchange of learning.

The situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territories is intensely political. Development issues here are not straightforward and are caught in the ever-present context of the Israeli occupation and its resulting restrictions and impacts on movement, land, water, construction, markets, education and health.

APHEDA has a long-term commitment to working in the Occupied Palestinian Territories with programs in the West Bank and Gaza, and with Palestinian refugees in Lebanon since our founding more than 25 years ago. One project, funded by the Australian Government agency, AusAID, is a food security project across ten villages in the Tulkarem district of the West Bank and the Khan Younis district in the southern Gaza Strip with the MA‘AN Development Centre.

MA‘AN is one of the strongest and most vibrant secular and politically independent national organisations in Palestinian civil society today, with a holistic approach to development, politics and a special focus on the environment and human rights.

This project works with farmers to boost their agricultural production, utilise organic methods, save water, increase incomes and ultimately build household and community resilience in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

However, implementing a coherent project across these two separate regions is difficult. MA‘AN organises monthly videoconferencing with staff in both offices to maintain continuity, as travel between the two areas requires permits from Israel which are rarely granted. MA‘AN’s project manager has not been able to visit the Gaza Strip in over three years.

Together with MA‘AN staff, I visited the Al-Kafriyat region of Tulkarem and spoke with local farmers. These farmers are skilled, experienced, hardworking and have been farming the land for generations, evident from the thick trunks of centuries-old olive trees. So why work on a food security project in a land that has been producing food for thousands of years? The answer goes back to the issue of land confiscation. When an illegal Israeli settlement is built in the West Bank, it does not happen in a bubble. For Palestinian farmers it means the arbitrary confiscation of some of their best agricultural lands and water sources, with no compensation.

Our project strategy is to boost food production at the household level, as well as building the long-term capacity of local community-based organisations. Key to this is making investments in agricultural infrastructure, including irrigation systems, land rehabilitation and greenhouse construction. Next year, the project will begin building a modest length of agricultural road to improve farmers’ access to their fields. We are working with farmers to utilise whatever land they have left – increasingly land that was considered marginal, such as steep or rocky slopes.

Our results speak for themselves – women participants have increased their incomes by an average of 25.6%. The region now has an additional 10,500 m³ of rainwater harvesting capacity achieved by increasing the number of ground-water cisterns. Across the Gaza Strip and West Bank, we have constructed more than 316 greenhouses and distributed 480 beehives. We have increased the amount of agricultural land in use by our farmers by almost 4% in the West Bank and more than 7% in the Gaza Strip.

I am convinced our project is increasing the food security, self-reliance and resilience of the community. But, ultimately, building food security won’t remove the forces that keep people poor when the gains are so fragile in the political context. There needs to be a solution that involves justice for the Palestinians, free and secure access to their land and natural resources, and the right to earn their own livelihoods. □
**UNION AID ABROAD-APHEDA RAFFLE 2012**

The Union Aid Abroad-APHEDA 2012 raffle was drawn on June 2. In case you missed this year’s prize winners on our website or the newspaper notice, first prize (a travel voucher valued at $8,000) was won by K Satter from the ACT. Second prize (a $1,399 Gazelle Bicycle) was won by L Matahaere from QLD. The booksellers’ draw (a $1,399 Gazelle Bicycle) was won by N Coles from VIC. The highest individual bookseller was K Kristiansen from NSW.

Congratulations to the winners, and many thanks to all who sold books of tickets in their workplaces and communities, and to everyone who purchased tickets. The 2012 raffle raised just over $90,000, so well done. **Special thanks to our excellent raffle sponsors, ME Bank and ACTU Member Connect.**

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**END OF FINANCIAL YEAR APPEAL - WORKING WOMEN'S CENTRE TIMOR-LESTE**

Special thanks to the more than 300 people who made a contribution to the work of the Working Women’s Centre Timor-Leste (WWC-TL) via our end of financial year appeal. An amazing $46,800 was raised and will be used by the WWC-TL to continue its work to increase women’s participation in the workforce and contribute to improving women’s income and working conditions - particularly for Timorese domestic workers.

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**EVENTS: CANBERRA, SYDNEY, BRISBANE**

The **Canberra & Region Activist Group** is putting on their Annual Spring Dinner on Wednesday 19 September. Please email Leila at leila.walter@cpsu.org.au for more information and to book tickets.

The **2012 Sydney Annual Dinner** will be held on 27 September at the Randwick Labor Club. Email events@apheda.org.au or call 1800 888 674 to book your tickets.

The **Brisbane Activist Group** is running a trivia night on Friday 5 October. Please email Danielle at danielle.mutton@fsunion.org.au or call 0434 162 764 for more information and to book your place.

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**STAFF MOVEMENTS**

We would like to welcome Jo Lin to the Union Aid Abroad-APHEDA family. Jo will taking on the role of Timor-Leste and Indonesia Project Officer while Shelly Cheong-Holdaway takes leave to have a baby.

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**“The social gains of humanity did not invent themselves and will not defend themselves. Only organized people can do that.”**

- Ricardo Levins Morales

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**Annual Sydney Dinner 27 September 2012**

**NEW VENUE - SAME GREAT OPPORTUNITY to share a night among friends and comrades in support of our overseas aid projects. Book your seat today!**

Thursday 27th September 2012
Randwick Labor Club, 135 Alison Rd, Randwick | 6.30pm til late
Tickets: Members & partners $65
Non-members $75
- Address by ACTU Secretary Dave Oliver
- Great Auction & Raffle Prizes
- Ask your union about booking a table

**Australian Super**

Call 1800 888 674 or email events@apheda.org.au to book your tickets.