

UNITAID greenlights patent pool for AIDS drugs

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Summary & Comment: The approval to start the patent pool by UNITAID will not only save more lives but also reduce the burden of dependence of people living with HIV/AIDS because they will be stronger enough to work. M. Makoni.

The executive board of UNITAID, the international health financing agency, has approved the establishment of a patent pool for HIV/AIDS medication, a decision AIDS activists say will go a long way in helping poor nations achieve universal access to treatment. "This decision will increase availability and lower prices, so more of our people can be put on ARVs [life-prolonging anti-retroviral medication]; it is definitely a step ahead in providing treatment for all," Sam Kibanga, national coordinator of the *National Forum of People Living with HIV/AIDS Networks* in Uganda, told IRIN/PlusNews.

Groups such as *Médecins Sans Frontières* (MSF) have long pushed for a patent pool - which would create a common space for patent-holders to license their technology for use by generic manufacturers in exchange for royalties - arguing that not only do they have the potential to reduce the price of existing ARVs, but to stimulate the production of urgently needed new medicines and formulations, such as paediatric ARVs and fixed-dose combinations.

UNITAID has identified **19 products from nine companies** for potential inclusion in the pool, due to come into effect in mid-201, and has been in consultation with several international pharmaceutical companies, including Gilead, Merck and Tibotec. The agency has committed to provide start-up funds of up to US\$ 4 million over the next year. Michelle Childs, director of policy and advocacy at MSF, noted that as being part of the pool was voluntary, the ultimate outcome would depend on the decisions of patent-holders. "Now that the pool has been given a green light, patent-holders need to move from expressions of general support to firm and formal licence commitments," she said in a statement. "This needs to happen fast, as the clock is ticking for millions of patients." Childs noted that countries could still use the legal mechanisms at their disposal, such as compulsory licensing and pro-health patent laws, to ensure people had access to life-saving medicines.

Kibanga said it would now be up to African governments to ensure there was enough money to take advantage of the availability of cheaper drugs. "In Abuja [during the 2001 African Union heads of state summit], we committed to spending 15 percent of our national budgets on health; it is important for us to meet people halfway when they try to help us rather than always being on the receiving end," he said.