



► ILO Brief

May 2020

Addressing stigma and discrimination in the COVID-19 response: Key lessons from the response to HIV and AIDS

Stigma and discrimination manifest differently in different contexts and for different populations, yet some aspects remain constant. Useful lessons have been learned in the HIV response that could be applied to the COVID-19 response.

This note captures some key lessons:

► Don't be judgmental

HIV-related discrimination was caused by fear, misinformation and because people saw it through a moralistic lens.

Calling COVID-19 a foreign virus and accusing certain groups of being responsible for spreading it can be detrimental. It increases stigma for some groups, and it makes others complacent as they begin to think of it as someone else's problem.

Let's be clear: we are all at risk of COVID-19.

► Mind your language

The use of stigmatizing words should be avoided. Calling AIDS "a gay people's disease" perpetuated discrimination. Similarly, the message "AIDS kills", used during the early years of the epidemic, was found to be counter-productive.

Instead of referring to "COVID-19 cases" or "victims", say people who have COVID-19. Stay away from saying people transmitting COVID-19 or infecting others.

United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the World Health Organization (WHO) and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) have developed a [useful guide](#) that should be referred to.

► Develop a rights-based response

One key lesson from the HIV response is that exclusion and punitive laws don't work. People did not seek testing and treatment as they feared facing stigma and discrimination. Workers didn't test for HIV because they feared they might lose their jobs.

Protecting human rights is a pillar as important as prevention and treatment in a public health response.

The COVID-19 response needs to be conscious of this and ensure that measures are taken to protect the human rights, including labour rights, of everyone.

In the world of work, international labour standards provide an important framework in this context. The ILO's timely guidance - [ILO standards and COVID-19](#) - should be used.

► Protect jobs and livelihoods

Within a short time, COVID-19 has caused a huge economic crisis and dramatically impacted the world of work. Millions have lost their jobs and livelihoods due to lockdowns and closure of economic activities.

As recovery plans are made, it will be important to ensure that those who were affected by COVID-19 face no stigma in resuming their jobs or economic activities.

People living with HIV stated it well: “If you take away our jobs, you will kill us faster than the virus.”

▶ Engage with affected communities

Involvement of people living with HIV and key populations affected by HIV made a huge difference to the response. Many employers' and workers' organizations took the lead in involving people living with HIV in the response.

Meaningfully engaging at the community level, including with people who have recovered from COVID-19, with their consent, can lead to increasing awareness and reducing stigma and discrimination.

▶ Respect Confidentiality

An important lesson learned from the HIV response is the right to confidentiality and privacy of medical information.

This principle should be guaranteed for people who may have COVID-19.

▶ Combat stigma in all forms and for all groups

The HIV response shows that stigma can take place on several grounds and can manifest in several settings. It can also particularly impact certain groups who may find it difficult to access services by virtue of who they are, where they live and work, or their sexual orientation.

The COVID response needs to take this into account and ensure that stigma and discrimination is combatted in all its forms.

▶ Share positive stories and give COVID-19 a human face

Behind all the numbers are human beings. People living with HIV made a huge difference in the HIV response by sharing their stories willingly, undertaking advocacy and activism for a rights-based response.

This approach needs to be applied in COVID-19 as well. It was uplifting to see the photos of hospital staff clapping as fully recovered COVID-19 patients were discharged from hospitals.

Such positive stories will go a long way in developing a COVID-19 response free from stigma and discrimination.

Contact details

International Labour Organization
Route des Morillons 4
CH-1211 Geneva 22
Switzerland

Conditions of Work and Equality Department
Gender, Equality and Diversity & ILO/AIDS Branch
E: ged@ilo.org