



AFEW Network (AFEW) has a long history of working to link the “east” with the “west” so when the decision was made to hold the 22nd International AIDS conference (AIDS 2018) in Amsterdam, the city that is home to *AFEW International*, the secretariat of *AFEW Network*, it was clear that *AFEW* could have an important role in leveraging the conference to bring global attention to the crisis situation in Eastern Europe and Central Asia (EECA). Starting from 2016, with the support of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA), various strategies (fostering linking, learning and dialogue; developing creative solutions to unresolved challenges; influencing leaders, policy makers and donors; addressing stigma, discrimination and criminalization of people affected by HIV) were undertaken as to empower communities from the EECA to take part in AIDS 2018.

Leading up to and during AIDS 2018, *AFEW International* engaged in a range of activities to promote EECA at the conference and to promote the conference in EECA. An independent evaluator examined the impact of the implemented activities and factors that contributed to the successes and analyzed the challenges. Below are listed the key activities and lesson learned:



1. Promoting AIDS 2018 in EECA region through the focal points in 6 countries (Russia, Georgia, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan)

AFEW International, with support of its members of *AFEW Network* and its local partners, undertook a number of activities to promote interest to and participation in AIDS 2018. For example, materials promoting the conference were distributed at various events and special session were held as to promote learning about the EECA region among the Dutch delegates. Six local journalists functioned as focal points for communication and they produced one article each month for distribution through a bi-weekly newsletter which was distributed regionally, and, in the countries, they served to promote the conference. In total 1300 people signed up to receive the newsletter directly from *AFEW International* and on

average about 30 - 35% opened it. *AFEW*'s Facebook page noticed an increase of followers, namely from 3863 to 4727 people. There were 631 followers on twitter, which accounts for an increase of 166 people. And an increase of 93 followers on LinkedIn. All these actions had an overall success on promoting the conference.

Lesson learned: 1. Successful promotion of the AIDS 2018 in the EECA region through the focal points in 6 countries, regular newsletters and direct advertisement at the relevant events; 2. Improvements are needed in attractiveness and readability.

2. Direct support to EECA CBOs and NGOs in conducting and presenting results of community based participatory research (CBPR)



A community based participatory research (CBPR) project enhanced the submission of abstracts to AIDS 2018. *AFEW International* provided technical support to people and organisations from EECA in writing abstracts by providing face-to-face and online trainings. The CBPR program provided training for 36 organizations, 25 of which received small research grants to conduct original research. In turn, CBPR participants submitted 28 abstracts to AIDS 2018. Ultimately, all 25 organizations who participated in the program were able to attend the conference.

Over 627 abstracts were submitted to AIDS 2018 from EECA region, which is three times more than were submitted to AIDS 2016. This is likely due in part to the abstract mentoring program as well as additional online and face to face trainings.

Lesson learned: Support for CBPR and mentoring on abstracts was an innovative way to highlight community knowledge. The CBPR model could continue as it contributes to filling the gap in the evidence on the needs of key populations in EECA and is likely to positively impact the number of abstracts from the region accepted at the conference.

3. Support to increased participation of the EECA delegates to facilitate sharing and learning and enable dialogues with delegates from other parts of the world

AFEW International was engaged in numerous activities - raising scholarship funds, organizing English-Russian translation of 25 sessions relevant for EECA, guidance during the conference, support to people needing assistance with visas etc. to help people to get to the conference and have meaningful participation in it. Thus, a total of 604 delegates from EECA countries attended AIDS 2018, which represents 4.7% of the total 12800 conference participants. Overall, the participation in the conference by people from EECA countries increased by 5 times in comparison to 2014 and 2016 conference. This was likely due to the efforts made by *AFEW* to raise scholarship funds and provide assistance to individuals to ensure they were able to participate.

Lessons learned: 1. Support for speakers in preparing for their presentations is very important and most valuable to ensure meaningful involvement of communities. 2. Individualized support was instrumental in ensuring participation for many participants who would have otherwise faced insurmountable barriers to participations.

4. Engaging with EECA governmental officials



AFEW International took a strategic partnership approach to engaging with governmental officials from the EECA region. As for that, country focal points regularly distributed information about the upcoming event to government officials as well as civil society. In 2017, *AFEW International* has accompanied the AIDS and Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights Ambassador of the Dutch MoFA Lambert Grijns to Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan with the goal of motivating governmental officials to participate in the AIDS 2018. A study tour of governmental officials from 5 countries of the region to the Netherlands has been organized by *AFEW International* to continue dialogue in the run up of AIDS 2018 in February 2018. 10 Ministers and Deputy Ministers of Health attended the Ministerial Policy Dialogue on HIV and related comorbidities in Eastern Europe and Central Asia organized by

the WHO European Bureau and Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It was lauded for being the first time in the history of the HIV epidemic that there were such a high-level gathering on the subject in EECA. The objective of this meeting was to create a platform where ministers could learn from each other and showcase good practices, which ultimately was achieved. *AFEW International* had a central role in coordinating participation of civil society during the Ministers' Dialogue with Civil Society, which was praised by co-organizers for ensuring that civil society participants' voices were heard and that the atmosphere remained comfortable with the Ministers.

Lessons learned: 1. The intense interaction with technical experts from Ministries have contributed to the good level of Ministers and Deputy Ministers at the Ministerial Policy Dialogue meeting to be held during the conference and help them understand the importance of the Dialogue with Civil Society meeting that followed it; 2. *AFEW International* was trusted by all stakeholders involved which enabled it to successfully manage the challenging task supporting meaningful engagement of civil society in the meeting.

5. Cultural activities to promote EECA region in the Netherlands

The Culture Initiative was undertaken to promote connections between people through art, food and cultural and artistic experiences. Its aims were twofold; 1) to build interest in the region among young health and social professionals, NGO staff and activists in the Netherlands and 2) to engage conference delegates with the EECA region to raise their awareness and willingness to invest their energy and or funds there. As for that, *AFEW International* hosted a dinner in the Hermitage,



which has made space where people could interact in an art-filled context without structured discussion. This helped to build bridges between stakeholders who would normally not be brought together.

Lessons learned: 1. Interest in the EECA region without using only images of “gloom and doom”;
2. Through art, interest in the EECA region can be inspired.

6. Joint campaign of the EECA networks, “Chase the virus, not people!”



“Chase the virus, not people!” was reported as the most visible campaign during the conference and it is still continuing to have impact. The slogan of the campaign was chosen as to highlight the stigma, criminalization and human rights violations that lie at the heart of vulnerability for populations affected by HIV in EECA and beyond. The campaign was successful in drawing attention both to the EECA region and the issue that lies at the heart of vulnerability there and for key affected populations throughout the world. Together with the regional networks [EHRA](#), [ECOM](#) and [ECUO](#), *AFEW International* has contributed to an immense success of the campaign. The impact of the campaign has extended far beyond the conference with some organizations using it on World AIDS Day and Zero Discrimination Day.

Lessons learned: 1. The fact that the theme chosen (addressing stigma, criminalization and human rights) was one that touched all key affected communities helped unite the different communities;
2. The high level of visibility of the campaign helped to bring attention to the EECA region.

7. AFEW’s partnership was the key to success

AFEW International with roots both in Amsterdam and in the EECA and with respectful partnerships with a full range of stakeholders contributed to AIDS 2018 success in nurturing the partnership required to strategize and coordinate the intense and multifaceted work that went in to making the conference a success for EECA. There were two main working groups that were involved with the coordination of most activities: one was the EECA working group and the other was the working group of regional community networks. Overall, the partnership was the key to success, considering that meaningfully involving communities is essential and this was done well by *AFEW International*. Commonly “owned” strategies; good communication on progress towards them and well-planned division of labor contributed to this success. Though *AFEW International*



was the “lead” organization in many activities, the fact that it did not engage in self-promotion was appreciated and contributed to success of the efforts.

Lessons learned: 1. Partnership was the key to success; 2. Commonly “owned” strategies; good communication on progress and well-planned division of labor contributed to this success.

Recommendations:

1. There should be more reach out to EECA clinicians.
2. Other governmental donors (not only Dutch) should be considered for high-level meetings.
3. There should be more reach out to EECA municipal authorities for participation.
4. Efforts to ensure that EECA speakers continue to be featured prominently in future conference should continue.
5. Work to continue to have vibrant EECA zones in the Global Village at other conferences will help promote interest in the region.
6. Improved work with journalists may have provoked more attention to EECA in light of the conference.
7. Work to keep EECA in the media (including from positive angles) should continue and improve.

The evaluation report was completed by Shona Shonning on 1st December 2018. The shortened version was created by Valeria Fulga on 10th April 2019.