

Civil society organisations discuss access to medicines

Story: Nana Konadu Agyeman, Akosombo

A FIVE-day brainstorming session on how civil society organisations (CSOs) can effectively work with the government and other stakeholders to promote access to affordable medicines in the country has ended at Akosombo.

The workshop, aimed at building the capacity of civil society organisations to enable them understand issues bordering on access to medicines, was attended by over 50 representatives from CSOs, Ghana Health Services and other health agencies.

It was also aimed at using a multi-stakeholder approach to ensure increased transparency in the regulation, selection, procurement, sale, distribution of medicine in the country, thereby improving access to medicines, especially for the poor.

The workshop was organised by the Health Access Networking, a co-ordinating organisation for civil society working on access to medicines in the country, and funded by the Medicines Transparency Alliance (MeTA) of

UK.

In an address at the opening ceremony, a Director of Health Access Networking, Mr Charles Allotey, said many people particularly the poor, had been struggling to access essential medicines to save their lives or improve their health, a situation he attributed to the high cost of unavailable medicines in most local health centres.

To address such problem, he said, MeTA aimed at bringing all stakeholders to a round table to discuss how to improve transparency and accountability within the marketplace to increase poor people's access to affordable essential medicines.

"Access to essential medicines really saves lives, reduces suffering and improves health; but only if they are of good quality and safe, available, affordable and properly used", he said, adding that "however, there is no sufficient data to suggest that these conditions are being met in Ghana".

According to him, since essential medicines were different from other consumer products and required special attention, there was the need for policies and actions to be

instituted to make them more accessible to all.

"Improvement in efficient procurement and local manufacturing of medicines to obtain the lowest possible prices for products of assured quality should be made an urgent priority to all stakeholders", he emphasised.

The President of the Pharmaceutical Society of Ghana, Dr Alex Dodoo, called on civil society organisations to come together to enable them to demand from the medical fraternity, both locally and internationally, accountability and transparency to ensure access to medicines at all levels in society.

That, he said, would ensure appropriate pricing of medicines to enable the poor to access them.

Buttressing his point, Dr Dodoo indicated that the lack of accessible and affordable anti-retroviral drugs for HIV/AIDS patients in South Africa motivated the HIV/AIDS activists to come together to help address the problem.

"By the commitment of these advocates, HIV/AIDS patients can now afford accessible anti-retroviral drugs, which have prolonged the lives of many patients", Dr Dodoo added.