

Special Report on the occasion of the World AIDS Day 1 December 2008

WFWO Calls For Focus On Prevention Remains The Best Weapon To Stop HIV/AIDS

Twenty-five years after HIV was first isolated by researchers, there is still no cure or vaccine against AIDS. It is estimated that today, more than 30 million people worldwide live with HIV/AIDS, and about 2 million people die every year. Over two thirds of these deaths occur in sub-Saharan Africa. In Europe, more than 700,000 people are living with HIV/AIDS with 30,000 new infections reported annually.

This year, which marks the 20th anniversary of World AIDS Day, also marks a major milestone in the long struggle against this disease. Well over 3 million people in low- and middle-income countries are now receiving life-prolonging antiretroviral therapy. Such an achievement was unthinkable 20 years ago, when the world was just beginning to comprehend the significance of this disease and its catastrophic impact on individuals, families, and societies.

AIDS is the most challenging and probably the most devastating infectious disease humanity has ever had to face. And humanity has faced this disease, in equally unprecedented ways. The international community has rallied at levels ranging from grass-roots movements to heads of state, from faith-based organizations and philanthropists to research institutions, academia, and industry.

"We need to underline the importance of the threat posed to the world by HIV and not to forget that HIV/AIDS is still a major health problem today". "We must continue to improve the knowledge, awareness and information on HIV/AIDS, especially among young people and high risk groups. As long as there is no cure for AIDS, prevention remains the best weapon to combat HIV/AIDS."

The HIV/AIDS is one of the main issues preventing developing countries being lifted out of poverty. We still need to do much more in raising awareness of HIV and how to prevent its transmission across the developing world. We must all work harder to achieve the Millennium Development Goals of halting the spread of HIV/AIDS by 2015. There's no time to lose."

On this 20th anniversary of World AIDS Day, I find it appropriate to reflect on some of these achievements. The response to AIDS changed the face of public health in profound ways, opening new options for dealing with multiple other health problems. It showed the power of determination to overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles.

Civil society brought the disease – and the needs of those affected – to the forefront of world attention. Attitudes changed. Treatments were developed. Clinical schedules were streamlined and standardized. Funds were found. Prices dropped. Partnerships were formed, and presidents and prime ministers launched emergency plans.

These achievements show the power of determination and global solidarity, but they also remind us of the challenges. I believe that the theme selected for this year's World AIDS Day captures these challenges well.



Leadership is needed to ensure that vigilance and diligence in responding to the epidemic remain steadfast. Despite the global financial crisis, funding absolutely must remain predictable, sustainable, and substantial. We must ensure that the current unprecedented rollout of treatment reaches more people and is fully sustainable. Stepping back or slowing down on treatment is not an acceptable option on ethical and humanitarian grounds.

Empowerment is critical for an effective response, and most especially so for prevention. We must do much more to empower adolescent girls and women, both to protect themselves and to act as agents of change. We must work much harder to fight stigma and discrimination, which are huge obstacles to all forms of prevention, treatment, care, and support. In many countries, legal as well as social and cultural barriers prevent groups at risk from receiving the interventions and knowledge needed to reduce harmful behaviors.

We are at a critical time in the fight against HIV/AIDS, despite progress in increasing access to prevention, care and treatment, 7,500 people are newly infected every day. We have to maintain this momentum, especially during the time of financial crisis. Funding shortages could take a deadly toll. If we falter in our HIV prevention efforts, human suffering will deepen, and as more people become infected, costs will rise.

Donors and national governments must uphold their commitment to the struggle against AIDS. If not, millions of people will face devastating consequences. The enormous investments that have been made will be undermined. And we will impede further progress towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals.

Achieved the 2010 target of universal access to prevention, care and treatment will require concerted effort, new resources and continued leadership from all levels of society – individuals, organizations and governments.

Finally, we must deliver. In many countries, the weakness of health of the AIDS response. On this World AIDS Day, let us redouble our determination to build on past success and to rally our forces against the remaining obstacles – in a spirit of solidarity and for the sake of human dignity.

WFWO's Communications Team