

WORLD AIDS DAY 2008
“THE ROLE OF LEADERSHIP”

World AIDS day should not just be a reminder of the horrible situation HIV and AIDS has created in the world and in particular sub Saharan Africa, but it should also be a day for applauding the progress that we have made so far. Hopefully one day, it will be a day in which we can celebrate our momentous triumph over a disease that has exposed many of our society's shortfalls. But we can only applaud ourselves if and when we ensure that our leaders stick to their commitments and every single person becomes a leader within their communities by challenging societal norms like gender inequality, dangerous cultural practices, stigma, discrimination and poverty which are detrimental to the fight against AIDS.

Last year alone we lost another 1.5 million Africans to HIV and AIDS. Today 22 million people in Africa are HIV positive. For decades we have witnessed loved ones die and the gap left by them continues to devastate our countries, especially in sub Saharan Africa.

As things stand now, the number of new infections outstrips the advances made in treatment numbers. According to the most recent 2008 UNAIDS report on the state of the HIV and AIDS epidemic, *for every two put on ARVs, another five become newly infected.*

But there is hope for tomorrow. Recent UNAIDS statistics also show that finally there is good news as the epidemic is stabilising in most African countries, while in a few others it is declining. However, of those living with AIDS only 30% have access to ARVs. Therefore, it is essential that we continue to strive for 100% access for all by 2010 and call on our leaders to lead the way by ensuring that they keep their commitments on prevention, treatment, care and support.

In my position of UN secretary general's special envoy for HIV and AIDS in Africa and on the occasion of world AIDS day, I would like to appeal to all leaders of our communities. Whether it is our political representatives, local clergymen, traditional rulers or leaders of our families, we all need to pull together and realise the dynamic issues of the HIV and AIDS epidemic that need to be addressed.

If a real impact is to be made in making AIDS a facet of the past, better leadership is needed. It is essential for all leaders to pay close attention to the fact that social pathologies like conflict, poverty, bad cultural practices and gender inequality all contribute to new HIV infections.

It is in this vein that I would like to call on African governments to keep to the Abuja declaration of 2001 and reach their 15% budgetary commitment to health. Governments must honour MDG number 6 to combat HIV and AIDS and ensure equity in the distribution of treatment and diagnosis. Rural areas in particular need equal access to prevention, treatment, care and support. Leaders in Africa need to act swiftly to counter conflicts where rape and extreme poverty especially advance the spread of HIV and AIDS and frustrate attempts to get people on ARV treatment.

Our governments must resolve any bottlenecks that stand in the way of achieving universal access to ARVs by 2010.

We now know that some traditional practices are dangerous and contribute to the HIV and AIDS epidemic. Therefore I call upon traditional leaders to ensure that such practices are discouraged in their communities. At the same time I would like to ask traditional leaders to encourage the maintenance of family relationships that are a huge source of strength and support, as is in line with many of our traditions.

Religious leaders command large populations and are well placed to care for the needy. Therefore I would like to call upon religious leaders to support comprehensive prevention programmes and encourage their congregations to get involved in every aspect of the HIV and AIDS response.

At the family level I call upon families and parents to lead by example and support children as they go through the difficult stages of development. I call upon the youth to become involved in all aspects of the HIV response and to initiate and sustain behaviour that will protect them against HIV while offering support to other youth who are HIV positive.

For governments abroad, I ask them to continue to support and strengthen their response to the epidemic in Africa. I appeal to the international community to do whatever possible to contribute to predictable and sustainable funding for the fight against HIV and AIDS.

If we do not have leadership that is meaningful, powerful, forceful and fully executed for all people, then our children will never see an AIDS free world. I pray that it does not take another generation of people to wait for leaders that can bring positive, lasting and sustainable change.