
Foreword

Southern Africa is the epicenter of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Amongst those who care, and care deeply – as do all the writers in this book – the carnage of the last two decades is the stuff of hallucinatory nightmare. No-one could have imagined the toll on communities, families, individuals. When the definitive history is written, years and years from now, it may finally be possible to explain the inexplicable.

Why did the western world fail to respond until the graveyards and the coffins were the leitmotif of the times? What happened to the moral anchor of the so-called international community? Why was there a cornucopia of money for the prosecution of war, and a trickling pittance for the preservation of life? How was it possible that young women and girls could be decimated in such wildly disproportionate numbers while the world passively looked on? What would become of two generations of orphans, bleak, abandoned, bewildered, unloved? What in God's name could account for the loss of our collective humanity?

Why was the political leadership of Africa strangled by silence and denial for so long?

Where were the voices of outrage?

As I write these words, I've been in the UN Envoy role for three and a half years. Finally, but so very late, glimpses of hope are sighted. The determination of the World Health Organization to put three million people into treatment by the year 2005 has become the rallying cry of the African continent. Finally, low-cost, generic antiretroviral drugs are beginning to flow. Finally, resources – albeit never enough, not even remotely enough – are beginning to appear. Finally, the devastated infrastructures and the loss of human capacity have become the stuff of debate. Finally, health and education and agriculture have climbed to the top of the agenda. Finally, food is seen as the inseparable partner of treatment.

The year 2005 ushers Prime Minister Tony Blair into the leadership of the G8 and the European Union. His Commission on Africa will report. Expectations are huge. Around the world, the principled activists are holding their breath.

But in the death valleys of Southern Africa, time ticks on relentlessly. And as the essayists of this book reveal, so many questions remain to be explored, remain unanswered. The largest question hovers over South Africa. How can it be that the surrounding countries of SADC are moving heaven and earth in response to the pandemic, and South Africa, the acknowledged leader of the entire continent, is still wrapped in controversy and incrementalism?

I remember a visit to the HIV clinic at the Mulago Hospital in Kampala, Uganda. It was a clinic we now call 'PMTCT Plus'; a clinic where the prevention of mother to child transmission was the *raison d'être*, but in addition, the mothers who required it, were receiving treatment, as were their infected partners and children. One woman, to whom I was introduced, had been so ferociously assaulted by the virus, that her CD4 count had dropped to '1'. In the very throes of death, she went on antiretrovirals, and the 'Lazarus effect' took hold. Two months later, she had gained weight, she felt good, her spirit was irrepressible, she had returned to work, and there in the clinic, playing at her feet, were her two young children.

That, for me, says it all. The defining characteristic of the HIV/AIDS pandemic has been the needless loss of life, millions upon millions of lives. And even as we inch towards hope, the lives continue to be lost, daily, relentlessly, catastrophically.

Some may find it possible to forgive; it will never be possible to forget.

Stephen Lewis

United Nations Secretary General's Special Envoy on AIDS in Africa

November, 2004