

End inequalities. End AIDS. End pandemics

Carol Natukunda reports on the key messages from the World AIDS Day 2021

The world is not on track to meet the global commitment to end AIDS by 2030, the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) has warned.

As of 2020, global estimates show that there were 37.7 million people living with HIV, 1.5 million new HIV infections and 680,000 AIDS-related deaths.

Although Africa has made significant progress against HIV over the past decade, reducing new infections by 43% and nearly halving AIDS-related deaths, the continent is unlikely to end AIDS as a public health threat by 2030.

To achieve the 2030 global development goal of ending AIDS, countries should ensure that by 2025, 95% of people living with HIV know their status (target 1), 95% of those who know their status are on treatment (target 2) and 95% of those receiving treatment have their viral load suppressed (target 3). The Fast-Track strategy to end AIDS was initiated in December 2015 by UNAIDS and then in December 2020, the new 95-95-95 five-year plan replaced the previous 90-90-90 targets.

The World Health Organization (WHO) is tracking progress toward the 95-95-95 targets with a scorecard which was released in recently at the International Conference on AIDS and Sexually Transmitted Infections in Africa in Durban, South Africa. The scorecard found that as of December 2021, only nine countries – Botswana, Cabo Verde, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Nigeria, Rwanda, Uganda and Zimbabwe – are on track to reach the 95-95-95 targets by 2025; and many countries are falling behind key elimination milestones, with COVID-19 aggravating challenges.

The World AIDS Day 2021 theme 'End inequalities. End AIDS. End pandemics' shed light on the structural economic, social, cultural and legal inequalities that obstruct proven solutions to HIV prevention.

Winnie Byanyima, the UNAIDS Executive Director said progress in AIDS, which was already off track, is now under even greater strain as the COVID-19 crisis continues to rage, disrupting HIV prevention and treatment services, schooling, violence prevention programmes and more.

Without bold action against inequalities, the world risks missing the targets to end AIDS by 2030, as well as a prolonged COVID-19 pandemic and a spiraling social and economic crisis.

'We urgently need sufficient community-led and community-based infrastructure as part of a strong

public health system, underpinned by robust civil society accountability. We need policies to ensure fair and affordable access to science. Every new technology should reach each and every one who needs it without delay,' Byanyima stated in a message posted on the UNAIDS website. She also called for the need to health workers and expand their numbers, as well protecting human rights and building trust in health systems.

'Even before the COVID-19 pandemic hit, many of the populations most at risk were not being reached with HIV testing, prevention and care services,' said Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO Director-General. 'The pandemic has made things worse, with the disruption of essential health services, and the increased vulnerability of people with HIV to COVID-19. Like COVID-19, we have all the tools to end the AIDS epidemic, if we use them well.'

Whole of Society approach

Professor Francis Omaswa, the Executive Director of the African Centre for Global Health and Social Transformation, speaking on a television talk show, said the most practical way to end AIDS by 2030 is to take the whole of society and whole-of-government approach already being implemented under the National Community Engagement Strategy for COVID-19 response in Uganda. 'The intersectionality needs to go all the way to the communities with the help of Village health teams. Communities find local solutions to issues affecting them. It has worked well for COVID-19, it will work well for HIV,' said Prof Omaswa.

Prof Omaswa also noted that it was important to celebrate the gains made so far. 'There was a time when HIV/AIDS was a death sentence. Not anymore,' he said.

WHO says the key steps to accelerate the momentum against the disease include improving access to HIV treatment and care, notably by decentralising services to the grassroots and eliminating user fees for key services, increasing domestic funding by governments for HIV programmes as well as boosting the fight against stigma and discrimination so that those who need care have no fear seeking it.

References

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