

The Relevance Of Celebrating World AIDS Day

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Since 1988, the world has celebrated World AIDS Day in remembrance of all those who have died of AIDS-related illnesses and those living positively and bravely with HIV. World AIDS Day remains as relevant today as it's always been, reminding people and governments that HIV has not gone away. There is still a critical need for increased funding for the AIDS response, to increase awareness of the impact of HIV on people's lives, to end stigma and discrimination and to improve the quality of life of people living with HIV. The human cost of inaction on AIDS is an injustice by governments and people alike, if action is not taken to end AIDS.

After forty years of the HIV pandemic, there is still no cure or efficacious vaccine. However, there are antiretroviral drugs for treating HIV as a chronic manageable illness. Having HIV is no longer a death sentence like it used to be. But critical questions remain: Why are people still contracting HIV? Why are people still dying of AIDS today? Why are children still being born with HIV? These questions clearly show that HIV is still a problem throughout the Caribbean and globally as well.

The answers to these questions point to inequalities and that is why we continue to celebrate World AIDS Day until we end AIDS as a public health threat. Inequalities and their varied intersectionalities drive and perpetuate the AIDS pandemic. We cannot end AIDS without ending inequalities. Inequalities within and between communities or countries are stalling progress in the HIV response, and HIV is further widening those inequalities.

Inequalities manifest differently in different settings and structural circumstances. They include legal and policy barriers, cultural, social and economic factors that exacerbate the HIV epidemic in communities. Inequalities widen when governments clampdown on marginalized communities instead of repealing outdated laws, and inhibiting control instead of promoting and enabling inclusive, community-centered delivery. Inequalities in access to quality HIV services and financing for public health programmes negatively impacts on the resilience of community HIV responses as well as the capacity to close HIV-related inequalities which increases HIV vulnerability and further diminishes access to HIV services.

Punitive and discriminatory laws and policies undermine the AIDS response by pushing people away from the services they need and weakens public health efforts to reach those most at risk of new HIV infection or death. Removing these laws will help get the AIDS response back on track. Putting vulnerable women

and girls at the center of the AIDS response, alongside well-resourced efforts to eliminate gender-based violence, helps them to realize their sexual and reproductive health and rights.

Addressing inequalities and closing the gaps helps to increase access to HIV prevention, testing and treatment services and to improve their health outcomes.

In the Caribbean, new HIV infections have reduced by twenty-eight per cent since 2010 while AIDS-related deaths have reduced by over fifty per cent. This progress is significant and very impressive. In the case of Trinidad and Tobago, progress is being made by Government to expand HIV treatment and prevention services in the country. As a result, over the past decade, AIDS-related deaths have declined by thirty-three per cent (about 50% among males and only 11% among females). However, there is need to find out more about why declines in AIDS death amongst women is slower than men.

This year's call to action, for World AIDS Day, is encouraging more vulnerable women and girls as well as marginalized key populations including migrants to utilize available HIV services made available to them. There is need to sustain awareness efforts on HIV and to educate people about early health seeking behaviors and breaking down barriers to accessing HIV services especially stigma and discrimination.

By breaking down legal, cultural, social and economic factors which help fuel inequalities, the Caribbean would be able to fast-track the HIV response to end AIDS, by 2030, as a public health threat. UNAIDS calls on governments to:

- 1) Increase availability, quality and suitability of services for HIV treatment, testing and prevention, so that everyone is well-served.
- 2) Work towards achieving the 10-10-10 targets through reform of laws, policies and practices to tackle the stigma and exclusion faced by people living with HIV and by key and marginalized populations, so that everyone is shown respect, dignity and self-worth and feeling included.
- 3) Acquire and expand on large scale access to medical technologies and innovation (e.g. long-acting pre-exposure prophylaxis) to enable equal access to the best HIV science.
- 4) Increase partnership and collaboration between state and non-state actors and invest more to strengthen civil society and communities living with or affected by HIV. We cannot end AIDS without sharing our responsibilities and the meaningful engagement of communities at the center of the response to strategically tap into their local knowledge, local capacities and innovations.

Responding to these is not easy but it's not impossible to do. Governments must address inequalities to end AIDS as a development issue, a human rights issue, a gender issue, and a health issue. It requires bold and accountable leadership to meet the needs of communities living with or affected by HIV. There is need for courageous marshalling a whole-of-government and a whole-of-society approach to remove barriers due to inequalities and inequities to improve the health and wellbeing of people and to attain all the related sustainable development goals.

The global HIV response has faltered and knocked off track due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine and other global crises resulting in diversion of development resources to other areas of need. These realities are putting millions of lives at risk of HIV due to the widening inequality gaps in accessing basic services like testing, treatment, and condoms. We need to stop and protect the 270 people who get infected with HIV every week in the Caribbean and the 110 people who die weekly of AIDS in the Caribbean.

Wear your red ribbons with great pride, which is the universal symbol of awareness of, support for, and solidarity with people living with HIV. Continue with your advocacy and awareness efforts about HIV; continue with your local resource mobilization drives and get governments and businesses to act and to finance human rights and anti-stigma and discrimination programs in communities and at the workplaces.

I conclude in the words of Winnie Byanyima, UNAIDS Executive Director, “We can end AIDS – if we end the inequalities which perpetuate it. This World AIDS Day we need everyone to get involved in sharing the message that we will all benefit when we tackle inequalities,” “To keep everyone safe, to protect everyone’s health, we need to Equalize.”

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