

# A DEFINING MOMENT

M. Michel Sidibé, Executive Director of UNAIDS  
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**UN General Assembly High Level Meeting  
on AIDS**

## SPEECH

**By: Michel Sidibé, Executive Director of UNAIDS**

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### **A Defining Moment**

Distinguished leaders of this world, Mr. President of the General Assembly, Mr. Secretary General, ladies and gentlemen.

I am sure that most of you are expecting me to stand up here today and talk about the many challenges, problems and the turmoil we still face.

But instead, I want to start by sharing our collective achievements—our historic achievements.

Let us not forget that just 30 years ago, this mystery disease was called “Gay Plague,” “Slim Disease” and even “Shunned Disease.” People were afraid of each other and there was no hope.

These images should not disappear. They are part of our history.

### **The story of AIDS**

The AIDS movement is a story of people’s breaking the conspiracy of silence and demanding equity and dignity. And it is the story of people who are confronting society’s wrongs and seizing their rights. It is the story of people outraged, and their passionate call for social justice.

Over the past 30 years, AIDS has forged a new social compact between the global North and South. We have mobilized unprecedented resources with your leadership, and we managed to produce life-saving results for people.

Do you remember in 2001, when we were negotiating the Declaration? People were telling us that we cannot not afford to give treatment to people living with HIV in the developing world. That it will never happen. That we could not sustain it.

Today, we have more than 6.6 million people on treatment in low- and middle-income countries—eight times more than 5 years ago.

People were even telling us that our prevention strategies will never work. We only had three success stories then—Uganda, Senegal and Thailand.

**UNAIDS’ vision: Zero discrimination. Zero new HIV infections. Zero AIDS-related deaths.**

Today, we can say that 56 countries—34 of them in sub-Saharan Africa—have been able to stabilize their epidemic and to even reduce infections significantly. South Africa has reduced infection rates by 35%—India by more than 50%. China has reduced mortality due to AIDS by 64%. Botswana, Mali, Brazil—I can go on—have been able to reach universal access..

I know that sometimes it is difficult sometimes to just talk about success stories, but it is important for us. And I want to take a moment to say thank you for your efforts, and the personal advocacy of the Secretary-General to make sure the Global Fund can continue to deliver. And to thank also the U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief for helping us to produce those results.

And yesterday, under the leadership of Gabon, the UN Security Council adopted the historic new resolution 1983. It recognizes the deadly link between HIV and violence against women in conflict and post-conflict settings.

This shows that AIDS remains a critical challenge of our era. Because the Security Council decided to pass this new resolution, it means that AIDS is not over. That it is not the time to be complacent.

AIDS is unfortunately a metaphor for inequality, showing that the value of life is not the same across the world. 1.8 million people are dying of AIDS every year in the developing world—when in developed countries, AIDS is becoming a chronic disease. 9 million people are still waiting for treatment, and their lives are hanging in the balance. In the North we are seeing a new generation born HIV-free, while each year, 370,000 babies are born with HIV in the South.

### **Making the vision real**

We are in a defining moment.

It is time to agree, as the Secretary-General said, on a transformational agenda to end this epidemic—one that will achieve our vision of *zero new HIV infections, zero discrimination and zero AIDS-related deaths*.

This vision will be a reality,

- If we can revolutionize HIV prevention and mobilize young people as agents of change.
- If we can scale up to universal access to treatment—and embrace the benefits of treatment for prevention—without reservation.
- If we can break the trajectory of rising treatment costs.
- If we promote innovation, technology transfer and country ownership through a new paradigm of shared values and shared responsibility.
- If we stop violence against women and girls, and open a frank discussion about intergenerational sex and concurrent partnerships.
- If the vulnerable populations most affected by this epidemic—migrants, prisoners, people who inject drugs, sex workers and men who have sex with men—do not face discrimination and have access to life-saving services.

Finally, we will realize our vision of zero if we take AIDS out of isolation.

The AIDS response must be the catalyst for improving maternal health and child health. For reducing infant mortality, stopping TB deaths among people with HIV and strengthening health systems.

### **Pay now—or pay forever**

We cannot stop our investments now.

With an effective, up-front investment, we can make the down payment to alter the cost trajectory and end this epidemic. It is not a question of paying now or paying later. Either we pay now or we pay forever.

Getting to zero also demands that we unleash the power of innovation. If we can sustain our investments in research and development, and we will have, in five year's time, simple and inexpensive diagnostics and medications that can be available to everyone, everywhere.

We will have a microbicide that women can use to protect themselves from HIV. And we will have a vaccine that will eradicate this virus.

Again, people will feel that I am a dreamer. But I believe it is possible if we continue to sustain our efforts.

Getting to zero is not an aspirational goal or a magic number. It must be our common plan—to be transformed into reality. This is our destiny to seize.

Thank you.

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### **Contact**

UNAIDS Geneva | Sophie Barton-Knott | tel. +41 22 791 1697 | bartonknotts@unaids.org

### **UNAIDS**

UNAIDS, the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS, is an innovative United Nations partnership that leads and inspires the world in achieving universal access to HIV prevention, treatment, care and support. Learn more at [unaids.org](http://unaids.org).