

Speech

Statement at the UN General Assembly High Level Meeting on AIDS

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Mr. President, Secretary-General, Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen.

In the death of Dr Lee Jong-wook, the fight against AIDS has lost an inspiring and determined force. I join the Secretary-General in paying tribute to his vast contributions.

My statement today is made equally on behalf of the Executive Heads of the 10 Cosponsors of the Joint UN Programme on HIV/AIDS.

Excellencies,

Five years ago, in my statement at the Special Session on AIDS, I emphasized that “Two paths lead from this General Assembly Special Session....One path simply continues from where we are today: an epidemic that is gradually defeating us.....The other path out of the Special Session is one of commitment to stop this epidemic.”

It is clear from the Secretary-General's statement and his report that a growing number of Member States are embracing the second path, that of commitment to stopping this epidemic.

We have achieved more in the past five years than in the previous 20.

We have real results on the ground.

We are at a high point in terms of commitment and action.

But, as the Secretary-General has stressed, it is clear that we still have very far to go along this path of commitment. We have missed many more of the targets agreed in 2001 than we have achieved.

As a result, more people were newly infected or killed by AIDS last year than ever before.

As a result, the epidemic continues to outstrip the worst predictions, with communities and whole societies the world over paying a catastrophic price.

What needs to change? How can we turn back this epidemic? How can we avoid the massive, deadly failures of the past 25 years?

The first thing we need to do is a lot more of what we are already doing – and do it much better.

We must scale up all HIV services towards universal access. And we must do so more quickly and efficiently than ever thought possible.

The roadmap towards universal access is clearly laid out in the assessment report prepared by UNAIDS, based on public debates in more than 130 Member States. So the world has a socially backed agenda for action.

The other thing we need to do is to fundamentally change the way we think about the epidemic and how we deal with it.

Twenty-five years into AIDS, in rich and poor countries alike, we still approach the epidemic from a ‘crisis management’ perspective of short-term goals and attempted quick-fixes. We try to manage the epidemic like it is a passing emergency.

Yet AIDS is not only an emergency. It is a massive and long-term problem – one of the make-or-break issues of our century. So it can only be defeated with sustained attention and the kind of ‘anything it takes’ resolve that Member States apply to preventing global financial meltdowns or wars.

That resolve must be political – until it is beaten, AIDS must remain a permanent global political priority, led at the highest level in every country.

That resolve must be financial – it must secure over \$20 billion every year from 2008 on to make headway towards universal access and to overcome the weak capacity of the health and social sectors.

That resolve must be technological – it must speed innovation in developing microbicides, next-generation drugs, and vaccines, while also ensuring universal access to these lifesaving essentials.

That resolve must also be a commitment to true partnership, so that governments, people living with HIV, the most vulnerable groups, civil society, faiths and business work shoulder to shoulder to save lives.

And that resolve must address the fundamental drivers of this epidemic, especially gender inequality and the low status of women, homophobia, and AIDS-related stigma and discrimination.

Excellencies,

We need to commit to a strategic approach that recognizes AIDS both as a key, long-term priority as well as an emergency that requires an immediate response.

In other words, we need to run a marathon at the pace of a sprint.

In other words, we need to aim to deliver universal access right away, five years from now, 10 years from now and 25 years from now.

This is an exceptional challenge but the world can face it – if it applies the resolve that it has applied, for instance, to safeguarding international trade and finance or maintaining peace and security.

Excellencies,

Let this be the landmark meeting where Member States put in place the exceptional resolve needed to stop this epidemic.

I appeal to all delegations to conclude on a strong Declaration. A Declaration that, just as the 2001 Declaration of Commitment, will make a difference for people’s lives.

When 8000 people die from AIDS every single day, when 11 000 people are infected every day, the world would not understand, and should not forgive, if we fail the people without a voice who count on us.

I know fighting AIDS goes across national politics. Let it also cross international politics.

The world looks to your leadership, now and into the future, to end this devastation.

Thank you.