

CONCLUSION

Making a Difference

Hon. Jake Epp

What lies behind all of the projects described in these papers is a landscape of suffering. Though we must never lose sight of all the wonderful things happening in Africa, what seizes our heart today is the plight of the victims of HIV/AIDS.

And, according to UN numbers, there is a real possibility that things will get even worse unless we act now. According to a recent report, "more than 25 million African already have the virus, which causes AIDS. The disease has caused life expectancy in nine countries on the continent to drop below 40."

The harsh reality of these ruined lives is painful to see. Fathers and mothers burying their children...grandmothers and grandfathers raising their children's children ...and, in far too many cases, children raising children.

The UN report adds, "More than 80 million Africans will likely die of AIDS by 2025 if the international community doesn't do more soon to stem the epidemic, and another 90 million people in Africa could contract HIV infections by then."

"If by 2025 millions of African people are still becoming infected with HIV each year, these scenarios suggest that it will not be because there was no choice."

Why? The authors say that "it will be because, collectively, there was insufficient political will to change behaviour at all levels from the institution, to the community, to the individual and halt the forces driving the AIDS epidemic in Africa."

This political will is not just the concern of politicians. It is the will of a nation. In fact, it is the will of many nations.

The present crisis caused by the AIDS pandemic in Africa requires a collaborative solution. We cannot fight this disease without political will among African nations. But African nations cannot meet the tremendous needs that they face without political will in nations such as ours.

Canada has a brilliant reputation as a prosperous land and as a land of compassionate people. The whole world knows that kindness is a hallmark of Canadian culture. But the problems associated with AIDS in Africa are too big for kindness or even compassion alone. They call for the mobilization of all developed countries, all segments of civil society. Solving these problems will require us to be more efficient and effective in what we are already doing and, more importantly, to bring to bear resources that are currently not available.

That is why Health Partners International of Canada organized the conference, AIDS in Africa: Engaging Canadians. No stone must be left unturned. No organization in Canada is too small or too specialized to ask itself this question, "How can we become a part, or a greater part, of the fight against AIDS?"

To answer this question, which we might prefer to ignore, we must set aside stubborn myths.

No, the situation is not too far gone. Provided we muster the will and the resources and stay focused on the solutions long enough, we can help turn the tide of devastation.

No, the situation is not hopeless. You have heard here that many wonderful things are happening, particularly at the grassroots level. And there are thousands of stories like these in Africa.

No, there is no silver bullet, no instant solution. Beating this disease that threatens the very foundations of civilization will take a lot of hard work by a lot of people working on many fronts over a long period of time.

What we have demonstrated here is that they must be networked—in constant dialogue as part of a comprehensive solution—for the total solution to be integrated and effective.

No, the situation of AIDS in Africa is not the same as AIDS in North America. Dealing with AIDS in Africa for Canadians takes understanding, sensitivity, and the willingness to adjust to what Africans need rather than what Canadians might want.

Throughout these pages, we have read stories of hope. Against a backdrop of pain, we have seen a picture emerge of how things could be better. And they will be if Canadians become fully engaged in this fight.

Being fully engaged in the fight against AIDS in Africa is going to take effort and the application of significant resources. This presupposes that we won't just go home and let our attention be drawn away by another issue or another challenge. Being truly helpful in the case of such a monstrous pandemic will require sustained effort, surely for years to come.

Each of us must ask ourselves, what more can we do? And, how can we do it in a smarter and more effective way?

The stakes are high. But failure to respond to this monumental challenge will needlessly cause millions of deaths. It will also cause such economic and political instability in many countries that peace and security will be threatened. The tidal effect could be felt closer to home than we would like to think.

If the will to make a difference needs to start somewhere, and it does, let it be here. Let it be now.

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