

1 December 2008, Monday
Kamlesh Sharma, Commonwealth Secretary-General
World AIDS Day message

The 20th anniversary of World AIDS Day merits the strong reiteration that HIV and AIDS constitute one of the greatest threats to the health of our planet – but that the threat is being, and can be, met. The nations and peoples of the world want it. The families and friends of the 7,400 people newly infected every day count on it. And UNAIDS has told us again how to do it, in its choice of this year's theme. We are called to 'Lead – Empower – Deliver'.

The Commonwealth – home to one-third of the world's population but two-thirds of its AIDS sufferers – does all three, and hopes to step up its engagement.

The call to *leadership* has strong foundations. The vision and perseverance of a great many leaders have led to real advances in response to the HIV pandemic. In 2000 the global community raised its voice with a commitment to the 6th Millennium Development Goal, which aimed, amongst other things, to stem the spread of HIV/AIDS. Commonwealth leaders themselves have kept HIV and AIDS at the top of the agenda at Heads of Government and Ministerial Meetings ever since.

Yet leadership has to come at every level, in government, business, community, schools, and families. Much of the best leadership on AIDS has been demonstrated within civil society and faith-based organisations. Successes in Uganda and Botswana, for instance, with which the Commonwealth has been associated, have been the result of a broad-based national effort, from top to bottom.

The call to *empowerment* is based on the testimony of those who have been given the voice and the wherewithal to confront their situation.

In empowering young people across member countries in their life with HIV and AIDS, the Commonwealth – through its Young Ambassadors for 'Positive' Living Programme – has established a network of hundreds of young people across Africa, Asia, the Pacific and the Caribbean. These are young, brave, articulate, HIV-positive men and women who visit schools, scout groups, junior football teams and more, bringing messages of prevention, determination, compassion and acceptance.

The call to *delivery* has been reinforced by Commonwealth work in researching and publicising how AIDS has affected women and girls more than men and boys; how it has exposed doctors and nurses to huge risk, and raised for them the spectre of migration; how men and women are denied access to affordable medicine because pharmaceutical companies assert rights over their products.

But despite progress from these and other efforts, the epidemic continues to spread. Many policies and programmes remain unimplemented; homosexuals and prostitutes continue to be marginalised; women and girls are still routinely discriminated against in favour of men and boys; many living with HIV continue to encounter prejudice; and now – in the midst of global financial crisis – it is likely that funding for existing and new programmes will be affected.

These serious concerns must be met with renewed leadership, empowerment and delivery.

Nowhere is leadership more necessary than in making resources available for research into new and appropriate technologies, for new programme delivery approaches, and more community education, especially for the poor and vulnerable.

Nowhere is empowerment more necessary than in bringing women into positions of leadership and decision-making.

Nowhere is delivery more necessary than in erasing HIV stigma and discrimination, and bringing anti-retroviral drugs to the poorest people.

Leadership, empowerment and delivery go hand in hand, and the experience of the Commonwealth Young Ambassadors for Positive Living is compelling testimony to this. These exceptional young people have been driven to make others more aware of the causes and the consequences of the virus they now carry. Each has access to hundreds, even thousands, of young charges. Young minds can be shaped with the responsibility that comes with the gift of knowledge. Together, we can deliver on the goal we still strive towards 20 years later: a world free of AIDS.

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