

Health: More Money and Better Spending Needed

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African activists have called on national and donor governments to sustain their funding commitments to HIV, increase their investment in the entire health system, and to improve transparency and accountability in the way that health funding is used.

The activists were speaking at a press conference in Cape Town, where they are attending a regional advocacy meeting on health funding organized by the AIDS and Rights Alliance for Southern Africa (ARASA).

Adejoke Sonoiki of Nigeria-based Journalists Against AIDS warned that the fight against HIV is far from over, and that it cannot be separated from the fight for better health across the board.

‘We should not let people far away from reality draw artificial lines between the diseases that are intertwined in many of our lives’, said Sonoiki, adding that without substantial increases in the amount of money dedicated to health by national governments and donors, their ostensible commitment to strengthening health systems was ‘empty talk’.

At the press conference, Paula Akugizibwe of ARASA presented a statement entitled ‘HIV is not over-funded: Health is under-funded’, which has been endorsed by 87 civil society, research and health professional groups from 30 countries around the world. The statement warned that ‘shifting funding from HIV will not fill the yawning gaps in resources for health’, describing this move as ‘a cheap diversionary tactic that offers no genuine or long-lasting solutions for health systems’.

Akugizibwe pointed out that the long-standing neglect of health, even prior to the HIV response, has resulted in a wide array of public health crises that are now forced to compete against each other for a meager pool of funding. ‘This competition is completely irrational,’ she said. ‘We cannot keep shuffling our scanty resources from one disease to another and expect to see lasting change. Health, a vital requirement for stable societies and socio-economic development, needs to be prioritised and funded appropriately. But this cannot be at the expense of HIV, which underpins so many other health challenges.’

Akugizibwe highlighted that more than half of people who need treatment still do not have access to it and that lack of treatment increases the burden of other diseases. In at least 4 Southern African countries, more than 50% of under-5 deaths are HIV-related; and globally, HIV is

the leading cause of death in women of child-bearing age. However, as warned by Carol Nyirenda of the Zambian group Community Initiative to Fight AIDS, TB and Malaria, who also sits on the board of the Global Fund to Fight HIV, TB and Malaria, backtracking in funding commitments is threatening the sustainability and scale-up of HIV programmes.

Nyirenda described the next round of the Global Fund as 'extremely uncertain', explaining that the failure of the US government and others to meet their funding commitments has resulted in a situation where the more than 2 million people who are on ARV and TB treatment due to the Global Fund's support may see their continued access in jeopardy, and millions more may not be able to access treatment at all. 'I am living proof the Global Fund has saved lives,' she said, calling on donors to 'fund the Fund'. She points out that in 2007, for the first time, global AIDS deaths began to decline. 'Why undo this progress? This is not a time to slow down investment in the Fund, but to accelerate them.'

Harriet Mabonga from The AIDS Support Organisation (TASO) in Uganda, emphasised that while more money for HIV and for health in general is needed, more transparency and accountability from national governments is also crucial. Last year, Uganda lost US\$12 million from the Global Fund due to poor accountability 'a situation that has been repeated in several countries across the region. 'It is criminal to take from the sick to line the pockets of the wealthy and powerful. We will continue to fall behind unless our governments commit to using funds appropriately,' she says. She decries the lack of transparency in health budgets and expenditure, citing the immense difficulties that are faced in accessing data on health budgets, expenditure or outcomes 'from both national governments and donors. 'Withholding information is the best way to prevent accountability,' she said.

African governments were also put in the spotlight for their failure to meet regional health funding commitments, and for poor laws and policies that prevent access to health services for certain groups, even where resources are available. Allan Maleche, a human rights lawyer from the Kenya Ethical and Legal Issues Network on HIV/AIDS, pointed out that most African countries are yet to meet the pledge made in the 2001 Abuja Declaration, to devote 15% of national budgets to health. He also cautioned against discriminatory laws such as Uganda's anti-homosexuality bill that would institute the death penalty for same-sex relationships in people living with HIV, which he describes as 'counter-progressive, both for human rights and public health'. He emphasised that the struggle for better health is not only about money and clinical services, but requires a range of social and legal reforms in order to be successful.

Lawrence Mbalati of the South African Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) described some of the challenges that have been faced in South Africa with drug stock-outs, and people being turned away from receiving treatment in clinics. TAC has launched a campaign on resources for health to address these challenges. 'It is time to revitalise the

struggle for better health for all, which includes sustained scale-up of access to HIV treatment," he said.

The activists spoke against a backdrop of eyeballs inscribed with the words "We are Watching" "Fund the Fight against HIV and TB."

"We are watching donors, we are watching governments, and we will hold them accountable for the promises that they have made. The right to health is non-negotiable," concluded Sonoiki. Following the press conference, the activists will be launching a "Show Us The Money for Health" roadshow across the Cape Town city centre and townships to mobilise public attention to this issue.

See the statement here:

[HIV is not over-funded: health is under-funded](#)

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