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Fighting for the right to health: celebrating a peoples movement

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I would like to take the opportunity today, International Human Rights Day, to salute comrades in our struggle for access to treatment.

First I want to salute some of our fallen comrades - Oupa Fazi, Nkosinathi Magwala, Nomfundo Somana, Edward Mabunda, John Vollenhoven, Dr Steve Andrews, Dr Ivan Toms, Dr Sarah Ann Christianson, Violet Seboni, Thandokazi Kweta, Nandipha Makeke, Lorna Mlofana, Thabisile Mabuya and others.

I salute our comrades who have committed and dedicated their youth and adult life to the struggle for access to treatment for people living with HIV. I have had the opportunity to serve and sacrifice for the movement for nine years. When I was 22 years old TAC became a political home for many young people especially for women.

TAC?s aim at its inception was to reduce the stigma and discrimination faced by people living with HIV and to advocate for decent and quality healthcare for all. We started our work by addressing the policy challenges around HIV in South Africa. At that time there was no policy to provide access to treatment for HIV/AIDS.
At the same time we advocated for access to affordable treatment for HIV and opportunistic infections.

Our intention with forming TAC was to enforce our rights, specifically the right of access to treatment and healthcare. We did this through a combination of strategies and tactics - namely through community mobilisation, protest, education and through the use of legal action.

HIV is an indicator of deeper social and political crisis. This is often caused by high levels of social inequality, gender inequality and poverty. The formation, vibrancy and strategy of TAC provided a safe space and home for people to come forward and learn about HIV/AIDS and to themselves become the agents of change.

Through TAC we mobilised all sectors of society across race, gender, sexuality, class, and between people living with and those affected by HIV. Grassroots mobilisation was done through treatment literacy, the educational arm of TAC. We developed our cadres to understand the science of HIV and medicine as well as law, governance and politics under the leadership of Mthathi, Colwyn Poole and Herman Reuter. This is the greatest strength of the organization.

TAC branches were formed by community members in their areas for support and as a space for collective organising in their communities. This gave strength to TAC as these branches grew from one in Cape Town with 10 members to 256 in six provinces with 16 000- 19 000 members. Membership grew mainly in black townships but also in tertiary institutions and outside South Africa through organizations like friends of TAC.

TAC branches are structures that inspire community members to take action locally. Branches organised their demands around access to treatment at local clinics. Branches are the nerve centre of TAC.

A challenge that millions of South Africans faced throughout the late 1990s early 2000s was that testing and disclosing ones HIV status was taboo. We encouraged openness and debate on HIV in communities through our HIV-positive T-shirts. This campaign was coined after the murder of the HIV/AIDS activist Gugu Dlamini.

We have taken up women?s rights issues including access to healthcare and sexual and reproductive rights. The prevention of mother to child transmission (PMTCT) campaign has served as a starting point to address issues of sexual and reproductive rights of women living with HIV.

We launched our access justice campaign after the death of our beloved comrade Lorna Mlofana. Lorna was brutally murdered and killed in her own township in town 2, Khayelitsha. Lorna?s death opened up doors for many rape survivors to view TAC as home for them and the expectation was that we also had to ensure that their cases were followed up until justice was served. This led to TAC taking up issues of gender based violence which is directly linked to HIV. We needed to educate our members and communities about the link and to empower women living with HIV into positions of leadership. In 2005 our National Congress resolved that we should ensure that we build the leadership of women and people living with HIV.

TAC and our allies have succeeded in our push for a comprehensive HIV policy in South Africa that recognises the need for antiretroviral treatment to save the lives of people living with HIV. This did not come easily from government and at the time our relationship with government was very confrontational.

In 2004 Cabinet announced that the former Minister of Health, Manto Shabalala-Msimang, must develop an operational plan to provide treatment to people living with HIV. In 2006-2007, under the leadership of the former Deputy President, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, Nozizwe Madlala Routledge and civil society and under the auspices of a revived South African National Aids Council (SANAC) we undertook a process of developing a new National Strategic Plan for HIV/TB/STI (2007-2011).

Today South Africa has the biggest antiretroviral programme in the world. Around 800 000 people are on treatment. Our policy aims to treat 80% of all those in need and to reduce new infections by 50% by 2011. Also we have seen the prices of ARVs drop dramatically from around R4500.00 per person per month to around R130.00 per person per month.

Today we will receive a human rights award from the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung in Germany. The award will be received by the TAC?s Chairperson, Ms. Nonkosi Khumalo, and TAC?s OR Tambo District Coordinator, Ms. Noloyiso Ntamehlo. In October 2010 we will be launching our 10 Year History Book to celebrate our achievements and share our lessons and challenges.

All of this would not have been possible without our own people living with HIV and other affected heroes namely Mkhanyiseli Mpalali, Sindiswa Godwana, Thabo Cele, Nomfundo Dubula, Gordon Mthembu, Mziwethu Faku, Nompulelo Khweza, Ntombozuko Khwaza, Nomandla Yako, Busisiwe Maqungo, Matthew Damane, Mandla Majola, Thembeka Majali, Sipho Mthathi, Linda Mafu, Mazibuko Jara, Micheal Matyeni, Rolake Odeteyinmbo, Carol Portia Ngcaba,Ivy, Promise Mthembu, Buyi Mdlovhu Thembane Shabangu, Rebecca Hodes, Norute Nobhola, Bushula, Nathan Geffen, Isaya Sibiya, Gugu Mpungose, Bulelani Mvotho,Wiseman Maduna, Andrew Feinstein, Nokhwezi Hoboyi, Deena Bosch, Jack Lewis, Carohn Cornell, Adila Hassim, Terens Crow , Mark Heywood, Annie Lennox, Gregg Gonsalves, Carol Maimbolwa, Paul Kasonkomona, Paula Akugizibwe, Nozizwe Madlala Routledge, Pregs Govender, Barbara Hogan, Gavin Silber, Gilad Isaacs, Zackie Achmat, Sr Neliswa Labatala, Sr Nontuthuzelo Ntwana, Polly Clayden, Simon collins, Edwin Cameroon, Shula Marks, Rukia Cornelius, Rodrick Clarence, Madeira Adams, Dr Graeme Meintjies, Dr David Coetzee, Marta Darder, Phillip Mokoena, Dawn Wilson, Jonathan Berger, Dr Costa Gazi, Jeff Budlender, Legal Resource centre, Women's legal centre, Tswaranang, Powa, Inge Van Reneen and all of our families who supported us? to mention just a few.

Aluta Continua !

Vuyiseka Dubula
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