

Speech at HIV seminar October 2011

Visions and dreams

My first memories of HIV were attached to fear, fear of my personal wellbeing; fear of losing friends, fear of losing a battle. At times I even wondered “is this the beginning of the end of the world?”

History has shown us that great minds can conquer fear, that innovations can re-draw maps and old truths can become obsolete.

The thirty years with HIV has carried several shifts of mindsets, and brought us closer to the dream of making AIDS become history.

It is shifts in mindsets that make a difference:

When HIV first was discovered the world responded with fear, and then tackled it with **medical innovations**. Soon we knew the origin of the disease and how it was spread. The response was prevention for the non-infected and a few years later a treatment that could halt the disease in the body.

When it became clear that HIV had spread in Africa for some time, and that millions of people were infected, the problem was no longer on an individual level only. The epidemic had created and enforced problems as stigma, poverty, and gender inequality. Orphans were created in front of our eyes; communities were breaking apart when the backbone of society, the working generation, was dying in this epidemic. The problems seemed endless.

The shift of mindset at this time was to take on the socioeconomic dimension and stop seeing HIV as a medical disease only.

The response was multi sectorial. Involve people living with HIV. Prevention programs reached all levels of society. Radio and music were strong weapons aside with condoms for both men and women. There was an enthusiasm; everyone has a right to prevention.

But demands came from our patients and colleagues, demands that treatment should be available for all. Treating people in Africa – even I thought the idea was too far from reality because of rocketing costs and cumbersome treatment regimens, just to mention two obstacles.

The shift of mindset that changed our way of thinking that time was to advocate for treatment and demand the market to give up on high profits. From only -testing to know your status- to test and treat as a right.

Some words that mark this shift of mindset: Rapid testing, two pills a day, the right to treatment for all, the right to be borne virus-free through PMTCT.

The response to this shift of mindset was a great financial commitment: the world stood up and created the funds needed for a roll out of treatment and prevention programs. We began to hope that the epidemic curve could be bent.

Some of the tools we talk about are task shifting, simpler treatment, community mobilization, sexual rights.

The UN High Level meeting in June this year marks high ambitions. It is time to take new bold steps and to “get ahead of the wave” instead of running behind the epidemic. Are we ready for a new shift of mindset that will stop the epidemic? Let us hope that the two past years, 2009 with a flattened funding of the HIV response and 2010 with a 10% decrease of funding was just a parenthesis in the history of AIDS.

Dreams are needed: they are the fuel for our ambitions. We must allow ourselves to be visionary. It is only then that we strive for the unknown and reach for the best. Only time will show what dreams become the truths of tomorrow and what old truths will become obsolete.

I hope to meet you all at the AIDS museum, when AIDS is history. And that we then proudly can look back at the successes we all were a part of.

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