

Defeating HIV/AIDS: what is needed? *

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Sub-Saharan Africa is the region that is hit hardest by the HIV/AIDS epidemic: of the 39.5 million people estimated to be living with HIV/AIDS globally, almost 25 million (63%) live there. Moreover, 65% of the 4.3 million incident HIV infections in 2006 occurred in sub-Saharan Africa. The 7 countries with an adult HIV prevalence of more than 20% are located in southern Africa and especially in this region there is an increasing feminization of the epidemic.

The fight against HIV/AIDS is a global priority for a number of reasons:

1) from a humanitarian perspective it is simply not acceptable to withhold highly effective interventions from millions of people suffering from the disease or at risk of being infected; 2) in the high prevalence areas HIV/AIDS leads to negative social and economic development; 3) HIV/AIDS fuels the global TB epidemic, including that of drug-resistant TB.

Preventive strategies and measures against HIV/AIDS fall short, often because they are simply not available or are largely male-controlled. A preventive HIV vaccine is still far away; thus the drive to develop alternative prevention technologies, such as microbicides and oral pre-exposure prophylaxis, that could be female-controlled.

Beside a pressing need to scale up HIV prevention efforts, there is a similar need to scale up access to HIV/AIDS care and antiretroviral drug treatment. Funding to support this has increased greatly over the past years through several mechanisms (World Bank Multicountry AIDS Program, Global Fund to Fight AIDS, TB and Malaria, and the US President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief), yet the reality on the ground in sub-Saharan Africa is that only about 20% of those in immediate need receive antiretroviral therapy. There are considerable obstacles to a further scale up and to its sustainability. In the long-term, treatment of HIV/AIDS can only be effectively addressed in the context of strengthening general health care delivery and its financing through the introduction of risk-pooling and attraction of investments.

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