



**Public health in a time of crisis:  
The AIDS response as a litmus test of social solidarity**

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This year's ECOSOC Annual Ministerial Review theme "Implementing the internationally agreed goals and commitments in regard to global public health" coincides with an unfolding economic crisis which threatens recent public health gains. The prevention and treatment of HIV highlight what is at stake.

The number of people newly infected with HIV worldwide declined from 3 million in 2001 to 2.7 million in 2007. Access to antiretroviral therapy has reached more than 3 million adults in low- and middle-income countries; a 10-fold increase in coverage in only five years. Following two decades of rapid spread, these reversals constitute tremendous progress in the fight against the epidemic of our times.

However, much more needs to be done. Thirty three million people living with HIV require access to diagnosis, treatment, care and support. Moreover, for every two people newly on treatment, five more are infected.

Countries have committed to achieving universal access to a set of HIV prevention, treatment, care and support interventions by 2010. In meeting country defined targets, UNAIDS has estimated that 2.6 million new infections will be averted, more than 6.5 million persons put on treatment and 75 million women will receive prevention of mother-to-child transmission services.

Previous economic downturns have had serious negative impacts on health outcomes. We cannot let this crisis erode hard won gains. In fact, as the UN Secretary-General has urged, we must turn this crisis into an opportunity for a sustainable future. We can no longer work on AIDS in isolation. Instead we must think of AIDS as an opportunity to leverage broader health and human development goals.

The G-20 recently reiterated its commitment to support the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals, including HIV. Developing countries have been increasing domestic expenditures on AIDS over the past years. It is imperative that this healthy trend continues, despite the crisis. If not, poorer households and individuals will face unacceptable tradeoffs and vulnerable and marginalized groups will see an increase in infections – with tragic social and economic implications.

The resources needed to achieve universal access to life-saving HIV services have been estimated at \$25 billion. This represents a small investment given the magnitude of public investments in the banking sector and in economic stimulus packages. It also represents a wise investment: it will prevent the attrition of human capacity that will be much needed to restore global economic health. Moreover, financing HIV programmes can also strengthen public health delivery systems.

The global AIDS movement has demonstrated how governments, non-governmental, private and civil society groups can be mobilized for a common public health cause. As a result, stigma and discrimination have been fought and health services re-oriented and scaled-up to serve those most vulnerable and marginalized.

Now, more than ever, we need to maintain global solidarity for the health MDGs.