

At last, signs of progress on AIDS

New infections decline across sub-Saharan Africa



UNAIDS Executive Director Michel Sidibé
Photograph: UN / Mark Garten

According to an update released by UNAIDS in late November 2009, the number of new HIV infections in all of sub-Saharan Africa has declined by 25 per cent since the mid-1990s, amidst signs that the global pandemic may have peaked in 1996.

The main cause for the drop, UNAIDS asserts, is the success of prevention and education programmes that have finally begun to change the behaviour of people at high risk, including men who have sex with men, commercial sex workers, intravenous drug users and, particularly in Africa, young women.

In South Africa, for example, condom use during the first sexual encounter more than doubled to 64.8 per cent between 2002 and 2008. Zimbabwe, Zambia and Tanzania, among the countries hit hardest by the disease, all reported sustained declines in new infection rates. In Zimbabwe's case the rates have been in decline for a decade, as education and prevention programmes have persuaded sexually active adults to practice safer sex and reduce the number of their partners.

Treatment to prevent HIV-positive mothers from infecting their babies at birth has also made a difference. Between 2004 and 2008, UNAIDS reports, the percentage of women receiving such treatment increased fivefold to 45 per cent, producing a sharp drop in the number of babies born with HIV. Globally, UNAIDS estimates, over 400,000 new infections were prevented in 2008 alone.

“New HIV infections and AIDS-related deaths are declining in sub-Saharan Africa,” UNAIDS Executive Director Michel Sidibé confirmed to *Africa Renewal* in a written

interview. “The drop in infections is a result of the positive impact of ‘combination’ HIV prevention,” an approach that combines public education, access to condoms and other prevention technologies. It also results from a reduction in discrimination and bias against those with HIV and those at high risk of infection, along with policies that have promoted more responsible sexual behaviour.

“With increased access to anti-retroviral therapy in developing countries, we are seeing a drop in AIDS-related deaths” compared to the number of people with the disease, Mr. Sidibé said. “By the end of 2008, an estimated 4 million people in low- and middle-income countries were on anti-retroviral treatment.”

Although that figure represents only about 44 per cent of all Africans who need the drugs, it nevertheless reflects a remarkable increase in access to treatment. In 2003, the update notes, only 2 per cent of Africans in need had access to the medicines. ARVs are administered to patients in later stages of the illness and have become widely available in Africa only in the past few years as high costs dropped and disputes over patent rights and international trade rules were resolved.

Despite the progress, Mr. Sidibé cautions, infection rates in sub-Saharan Africa remain five times higher than in any other region. “The AIDS epidemic continues to evolve. Much more is needed to turn back the epidemic. Countries need to adopt a prevention approach that focuses on those most at risk of infection.”

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