

UNITED NATIONS



NATIONS UNIES

**THE SECRETARY-GENERAL**

--

**MESSAGE ON THE INTERNATIONAL DAY OF FAMILIES**

**15 May 2005**

The theme of this year's International Day of Families – the impact of HIV and AIDS on family well-being – draws attention to one of the most pressing challenges of our time. It is a challenge that affects families, extended families, communities and Governments around the world.

HIV and AIDS take a profound toll on families. When a family member becomes sick or dies, everyone in the family suffers. Added to the human tragedy are economic difficulties, first brought on by rising health costs and decreasing incomes. These escalate as the illness progresses, impacting the family's access to food, shelter and other basic needs. The impact of HIV/AIDS on families is particularly devastating for children. Often, young girls are taken out of school to take on the heavy burden of caregiving. With the death of parents, children and young girls are often forced to assume the responsibilities of the head of household. The absence of caring and supportive adults leaves many children highly vulnerable – to discrimination, child labour or other forms of exploitative behaviour -- and, in turn, to HIV infection. And it robs communities of a vital channel for transmitting values, cultural norms, farming techniques and coping skills to the next generation.

Clearly, we must do all we can to help the family remain resilient, as it is often the only safety net, playing a critical role in determining how well individuals and communities cope with AIDS and its consequences. That is why the United Nations General Assembly Special Session on HIV/AIDS, held in 2001, recognized the important role played by the family in prevention, care and support. It called on Governments to develop or strengthen strategies, policies and programmes that recognize the contribution of the family in reducing vulnerability and coping with the impact of the disease.

That means finding ways to keep parents alive. It means addressing gender disparities, and the vulnerabilities of young girls in particular. It means integrating family-focused programmes with broader community-based interventions aimed at reducing vulnerability to HIV/AIDS, improving prevention and care, and alleviating the epidemic's devastating social and economic impact. And it means stamping out the stigma that may prevent disclosure of HIV status even within a family.

A strong and supportive family is one of the first lines of defence against HIV/AIDS. On this International Day of Families, let us rededicate ourselves to helping this precious unit play its full part in that mission.