

## HIV/AIDS

More than twenty years after HIV/AIDS was first identified, we seem to have accepted it as an inevitable part of the human condition.



Gideon Mendel/Corbis/ActionAid UK

**But it is complacency and discrimination that are costing millions of productive lives needlessly every year.**

The impact of HIV/AIDS varies massively from country to country. Poor people in poor countries are worst affected. Poverty makes people vulnerable to HIV because they have less access to basics such as education, never mind condoms or medicines.

Not for the first time it's a story of two different worlds. Richer societies, with relatively low rates of HIV and more developed infrastructure and systems, have

managed to make expensive but life-prolonging antiretroviral (ARV) drugs available to most that need them.

In poorer countries, where governments struggle to provide the most basic education and healthcare, distributing medicines that require counselling and strict adherence programmes offers enormous challenges. However, increasingly, developing countries and affected communities are demanding that their right to the same medical advances be granted.

The fight against AIDS involves just about every facet of the fight against poverty – education issues, health issues, gender inequality, the despairingly cyclical nature of poverty itself. There are going to be no quick wins in this war.

And, while the statistics of suffering anaesthetise as much as they horrify, they must be repeated. An estimated 53 million people have contracted HIV since it was identified in the 1980s. It is thought that two million people will die from AIDS-related diseases in sub-Saharan Africa this year.

Approximately twelve

million children are already orphaned in that part of the world. Life expectancy in some of these countries is down from 60 years to 43 years.

How can we get our heads round numbers like these? How do we confront the fact that an estimated 40 million people are now living with HIV/AIDS?

In poorer countries men often work away from home. With little money or means to contact home regularly (and in a culture where masculinity is often measured by the number of sexual partners) HIV finds a fertile ground for transmission. Condoms are often unavailable or expensive, and offering or asking to use them may be thought to indicate HIV infection, bringing stigma, rejection and abuse. Women may be forced to sell sex, and HIV testing is a rarity in countries where any sort of medical care is miles away and often unaffordable anyway.

**The cycle of poverty**

So, it's poor people who get sick. And, of course, the sick who get poorer. Children, especially girls, are kept out of school to care for family members and to partly replace household income. Sick parents die leaving children orphaned and dependent on others. All this in communities that were already poor. In this way, HIV/AIDS deepens the cycle of poverty, unpicking much



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**HIV/AIDS deepens the cycle of poverty in poor countries, unpicking much of the modest progress of the last few decades**

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On the day you read this, 8,000 people will die from AIDS

of the modest progress of the last few decades. Things were getting a little better; now they are getting nightmarishly worse. How often does the clock get turned back like this?

For this is now nothing less than an historic tragedy. How will history judge us if we refuse to acknowledge what needs to be done or if we fail to defeat the most devastating disease the world has faced for centuries?

ActionAid International has been working on HIV/AIDS since 1987 and gives practical support to people living with the disease in 23 countries.

We are doing the basic things where we are able: prevention programmes, building community networks, fighting against stigma and prejudice, working in local communities so that poor people themselves can find practical solutions.

**International action**

But we know full well that work like this will only be successful if action is taken at the international level. Rich societies must find more money to fund the fight against AIDS. They need to take on the powerful pharmaceutical companies whose price-fixing and manipulation of patents are scandalous. Then they need to get the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund – who pressure developing country governments to reduce health spending in pursuit of globalisation – off the backs of poor countries once and for all. It's time to get angry. It's

time to see HIV/AIDS as reversible. It's time to acknowledge that we know a lot about HIV/AIDS prevention, care and treatment. It's time to share with the world's poor the protection and treatments that have worked for the world's rich. It's time to be enraged that we have let things get this bad.

On the day you read this, 8,000 people will die from AIDS. They didn't have to. ActionAid International will continue to campaign on this issue in any way we can. The battle will not be easy and will not be quick.

But it has to be fought.



It's time to share with the world's poor the protection and treatments that have worked for the world's rich

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**ActionAid International is a unique partnership of people who are fighting for a better world – a world without poverty.**

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