



**DENIS BIRUNGI > HIV/AIDS**

# Fighting HIV/Aids requires adequate funding, drugs and condoms for youth

**A**s the fight against HIV/Aids continues both on the national and international platforms, it should be emphasised that the most effective approach is one which is strategically collective and broad-based. Government and other actors should on top of providing HIV/Aids-related services, address the root causes as well. The individual should also take a more active role because he or she is the end target.

A comprehensive approach requires a concerted effort by all actors. At an individual level, pregnant mothers should embrace antenatal care and have deliveries in a hospital.

For those not infected, they should abstain or use condom and remain safe. Those who are infected should seek treatment and also avoid spread the disease. At institutional level, there should be provision of leadership as well as strategic regulatory and policy measures.

The enactment of the HIV/Aids and Prevention and Control Act of 2014, is a step in the right direction. Section 24 of the Act describes broadly State obligations in the fight against HIV, including providing adequate funding for HIV programmes and developing a national health plan and strategy for fighting HIV. If effectively implemented, the law will achieve a lot.

The campaign against HIV/Aids has achieved tangible progress and we should,

while celebrating this development, intensify our effort, evaluate our approach and fill the remaining gaps to achieve an HIV/Aids-free generation.

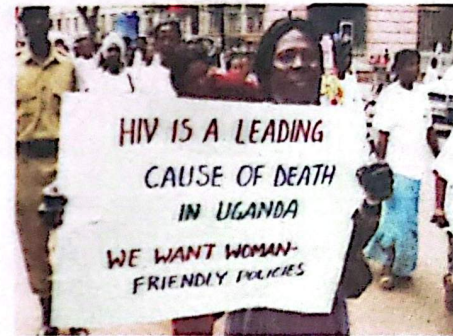
First, we should insure that everyone has the relevant knowledge and skills for HIV prevention and mitigation. Myths and misconceptions continue to mislead many people, especially the youth, and these can only be corrected by providing scientifically relevant and correct information.

Schools offer a ready audience for information delivery, especially to youth. The government and NGOs should utilise this platform by implementing a nationwide HIV ABCDE (Abstinence where possible, Being faithful, Condom use, Drugs to properly treat infections and Educating oneself with full and true facts about the disease) awareness programmes covering all schools.

This should also entail a package for youth-friendly services where both in and out of school youth can obtain information and access free condoms. While there are free condoms at most government hospitals, many young people feel shy to access them.

The contribution of poverty to HIV transmission may not be easy to quantify, but it is significant. In most rural parts of the country, young girls remain vulnerable and at high risk due to lack of means for sup-

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port. Coupled with misleading information from peers, Internet and social media platforms, they often fall prey marauding men and give in to unprotected sex, which exposing them to the HIV virus.

Effective and strategic fight against HIV should address some of these root causes. Economic empowerment for girls and women is key in shielding them from early sexual encounter and exploitation.

A hungry school girl with no hope of finding the next meal will most likely give in to sexual demands with expectations of financial support.

Of course, empowerment also includes efforts to keep girls in school. While government has provided free primary and secondary education, only 61.6 per cent and 36.2 per cent (according to the Ministry of Education Annual Performance Report for F/Y 2015/2016), complete primary and lower secondary levels respectively.

Even those who manage to complete these levels, most of them often get stuck with no means for further education let alone the hope of finding a job.

More investment in technical schools that equip youth with practical skills is another strategy to address unemployment and idleness - both factors that expose youths to early sexual behaviour. Unemployed and idle youth are more likely to indulge in not only early sexual activity but also drug abuse - a major factor in the spread of HIV. Creation of employment opportunities is thus an essential component in the fight against HIV.

As we celebrate the successes achieved, let us also evaluate our strategies to close the existing gaps, address the root causes and realise the dream of an Aids-free generation. A holistic approach is not an easy project to undertake, but with commitment, consistency and the political will, we can get there someday.

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