

US allays fears of HIV-AIDS funding cutbacks

By Gloria Nakajubi

The US Embassy in Uganda has dispelled fears that health and particularly HIV/AIDS funding is likely to face major cuts given the recent aid reviews under the new administration.

According to the Embassy, Rex Tillerson, the Secretary of State, said: "Health assistance is to remain a policy focus in Africa."

As one of the leading funders towards the HIV/AIDS fight through the US President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), there has been growing concern after President Donald Trump called for cuts in foreign aid earlier this year.

"PEPFAR was started under the George W. Bush administration and has maintained bipartisan support through multiple administrations, congressional sessions and a global economic crisis. PEPFAR funding is approved through 2018, and we are hopeful the programme will continue," says the embassy spokesperson, Phil Dimon.

According to Dimon, the bulk of US government assistance to Uganda is dedicated to health. Between October 2016 and September 2017, approximately \$501m (sh1.8 trillion) has been invested in Uganda's health sector.

Dimon explains that one of the major avenues to boosting Uganda's efforts in achieving the 90-90-90 goals is through the PEPFAR funding. This goal stipulates that by 2020, 90% of all people living with HIV will know their status, 90% percent of all people diagnosed with HIV will be on antiretroviral therapy and 90% of people receiving antiretroviral therapy will have viral load suppression.

"US assistance through PEPFAR is moving Uganda towards this goal with efforts to strengthen health and laboratory systems and to provide essential HIV commodities, including life-saving medicines, to health facilities and patients," Dimon explains.

US EMBASSY'S PHIL DIMON SAYS PEPFAR FUNDING IS APPROVED THROUGH 2018, AND THEY ARE HOPEFUL THE PROGRAMME WILL CONTINUE, ADDING THAT THE BULK OF US ASSISTANCE TO UGANDA IS TO HEALTH

One of the major challenges in the HIV/AIDS fight has been getting men on board. Through PEPFAR, they have been one of the target populations. This has been done through identifying and treating HIV-positive men, supporting voluntary male medical circumcision to help prevent HIV transmission and ensuring that all HIV-infected individuals remain virally suppressed through care and treatment.

Engaging men, Dimon argues must be a key part of Uganda's HIV response for the country to achieve epidemic control.

"More men must be diagnosed and initiated on treatment and the stigma around seeking HIV services must be addressed. To ensure we protect women, we must ensure that men find out their status, and if they are living with HIV, we must ensure that they are on treatment," he says, adding that the conversation around gender-based violence needs to be more pronounced as this makes women and girls vulnerable to HIV.

Through the DREAMS programme, Dimon says the US government is helping roll back the higher infection rates among young girls and women. The objective is to create a generation

of determined, resilient, empowered, AIDS-free, mentored and safe girls and young women.

"In Uganda, adolescent girls and young women are particularly susceptible to new HIV infections. We must do more to ensure that young people know their status, access care, and receive the most effective regimens."

As an overall priority, he argues that there is need to ensure that those who are HIV-negative stay negative, with interventions including timely access to age-appropriate sexual and reproductive health education, reduction of stigma and discrimination, economic empowerment, ensuring young people stay in school, promoting correct and consistent condom use and combatting sexual and physical violence.

Through tight control and monitoring programmes, the US government, according to Dimon, ensures that all the money allocated is used for the purpose it is meant for. This is, however, done through support to the Ugandan government system and third party auditors.

Why its unwise to cut HIV/AIDS funding

While responding to proposed aid cuts, global healthcare philanthropist, Bill Gates argues that as the number of young people, particularly on the continent, who are the most at risk of contracting HIV/AIDS, more interventions than cut backs must be emphasised.

"What that means is pretty clear. If we only do as well as we have been doing on prevention, the absolute number of people getting HIV will go up even beyond its previous peak," he says.

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation estimates that with just a 10% global budget cut in funding for antiretroviral treatment, the number of new HIV cases per 10,000 people each year could rise to the levels of the peak of the epidemic at the turn of the century.

According to Gates, "In a world of competing priorities and limited resources, these conversations are mandatory, but I want to be sure that the people having them are clear about the consequences."