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Worlds AIDS Day: Why we must sustain the momentum

Tomorrow, Uganda joins the rest of the world to commemorate World AIDS Day. I want to extend my appreciation to those who have led Uganda in our quest to end HIV infection. Most especially, people living with HIV - the champions who have stood resolute in the face of HIV and AIDS, knowing that the journey to "zero" is a long one.

Uganda's epidemic has now stabilised and the number of Ugandans dying from HIV/AIDS-related illness has nearly halved. This is in part due to increases in the coverage and intensity of HIV prevention interventions and the expansion of HIV treatment. We are making good progress in our quest towards containing HIV and AIDS in Uganda.

Today, we stand at a very important threshold, with a clear road map to end the AIDS epidemic; our target is that by 2020, 90% of all people living with HIV will know their HIV status, 90% of all people with diagnosed HIV infection will receive sustained anti-retroviral therapy and 90% of all people receiving anti-retroviral therapy will have viral suppression. The end seems to be in sight, we only need to sustain this momentum and address other issues that may undermine these efforts.

One health determinant, however, is the unchecked population growth that threatens the provision of quality healthcare services and the well being of Ugandans as a whole. Uganda's population grows by 3% every year. This should concern each one of us because it undermines our ability to effectively cater to the needs of the people.

Research suggests that there is a relationship between high population growth and high poverty levels. A high population means limited opportunities for our people and puts further strain on already limited resources.

As a signatory of the Sustainable Development Goals framework, we are required to ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health services by 2030. The Ministry of Health and development partners are now encouraging integration of family planning into other health services. However, such efforts continue to be undermined by stock-outs of contraceptive commodities and conflicting messages on family planning, particularly surrounding use of contraceptives by adolescents.

Such challenges continue to curtail improvements in meeting couples' desire to safely plan their families. For instance, in every 100 women of reproductive age, 34 have an unmet need for family planning and, less than a quarter of all women of reproductive age use a modern contraceptive. Therefore, as we celebrate the gains made, we cannot turn a blind eye to the persistent challenges that remain. The worrying health trends among Uganda's young people continue to be a major cause for worry.

In 2016, the Uganda Demographics and Health Survey reported that the rate of teenage pregnancies rose from 24% to 25%, an increase that is unacceptable.

By increasing access to sexual reproductive health services we would not only provide an antidote to the population explosion; we would also prevent unintended pregnancies and avert unsafe abortions.

We have made commendable efforts so far. We must collectively work towards consolidating those gains and sustaining progress. Getting to "zero" is no easy feat, and will require investment, strong partnerships and innovative approaches, if we are to make it to the finish line. We must review current policies and long-standing beliefs that impede our progress.

I look forward to a generation free of HIV, a future with zero unplanned pregnancies, zero unsafe abortions and zero unmet need for family planning. This future is possible if today, we aim at 90% women of reproductive age accessing family planning, 90% modern contraceptive prevalence and 90% planned pregnancies. This future is a moral imperative — because our people deserve better.

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