

# A WAKE-UP CALL FOR WORLD LEADERS

Insights from Stephen Lewis, former United Nations Special Envoy on HIV/AIDS *by Kimberly Johnston*



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Stephen Lewis is a keynoter presenting at the 2007 World Credit Union Conference in Calgary, Canada, July 29-August 1.

“During the 1990s it was clear that globalization wasn’t working where poverty, disease or conflict was concerned. It was because of the world’s passivity in the face of this pandemic that world leaders set forth the UN Millennium Development Goals.”

—Stephen Lewis, former UN Special Envoy on HIV/AIDS

The UN Millennium Development Goals focused on improving such fundamental areas as education, health and standards of living by 2015:

1. Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
2. Achieve universal primary education
3. Promote gender equality and empower women
4. Reduce child mortality
5. Improve maternal health
6. Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases
7. Ensure environmental sustainability
8. Develop a global partnership for development

The world was hopeful when the UN put forth the Millennium Development Goals in 2000, but already halfway through the initiative, not one of the goals is even close to being met on the continent of Africa. Lewis attributes that to the HIV/AIDS pandemic and excruciating poverty.

“The situation of people living and dying with AIDS in parts of Africa is so desperate that even the most basic help will bring solace.”

— Stephen Lewis



“There are few glimmers of hope among the realities of harsh despair,” Lewis explained.

Twenty-five million of the estimated 40 million people in the world with HIV/AIDS live in sub-Saharan Africa. The majority of people living with HIV/AIDS are prime working age. Imagine the impact if up to one of every three members in your credit union were infected or dying from this disease.

Credit unions in Africa are seeking ways to combat the impact of HIV/AIDS on their communities and on the soundness of their institutions. The reality of HIV/AIDS affects them on various levels, from credit risk to human resources.

The effect of the HIV/AIDS pandemic on households is immense. According to a recent UNICEF report, 12 million of the 48 million orphans in sub-Saharan Africa have lost one or both parents to AIDS, and fewer than 10% of them receive any financial support.

Lewis recalled his time as the UN Special Envoy on HIV/AIDS to Africa, when he toured an elementary school in Zimbabwe. A teacher he visited there had asked her students to draw pictures of their families. Such a seemingly simple assignment brought a great deal of grief. Many of their families had been destroyed by HIV/AIDS.

When Lewis asked the teacher what they did in the face of death, she responded, “They pray. If you went to funerals over lunch, after school and on the weekend, the only thing you would have left is prayer.”

When family members become ill, the burden on women as caretakers and housekeepers becomes significantly heavier. They are often forced to step into the breadwinning role, tap into their small savings, sell productive assets and take on increasing debt as medical and funeral costs mount.

Lewis recalled his time in Ghana, where he learned about a small income-generating project for women infected with HIV/AIDS.

“We came to an open field, half of which was made up of cabbage, and there was a group of women proclaiming their HIV status,” he shared. “They were holding a banner that read, ‘We Are HIV Positive.’” Lewis asked one of the women if she kept any of the cabbage they grew to boost her immune system, and another woman answered that they sold most of the produce at the market. When Lewis further questioned what they did with the profits, the woman repeated the question to herself and then explained, “We buy coffins. We never have enough coffins.”

According to Lewis, gender inequality is a main contributor to the growing pandemic in Africa, where approximately 59% of those infected with HIV/AIDS are women. “Nowhere are power inequalities and their consequences more clearly displayed than for women,” he emphasized. “The largest percentage of people testing positive for HIV are married women, and they are dying in incredible numbers.”

Providing access to financial services, creating jobs, strengthening women’s property rights and cleaning up justice systems and public administration are basic steps that can elevate the position of women and attack inequality.

Lewis admits that the world’s complacency regarding death eludes him. “I still do not understand how it is possible to see millions of people as expendable when you have both the resources to prevent the transmission and medication to keep people alive. Yet I witnessed this year after year.”

Work is being done to save lives, and credit unions play an important role because of their trusted position in communities. WOCCU’s HIV/AIDS Member Awareness Program in Kenya, for example, is a collaborative effort with Mwalimu SACCO and JHPIEGO, a non-profit health organization affiliated with Johns Hopkins University. The program trains credit union members as peer leaders to educate fellow Mwalimu members and the community on HIV/AIDS-related issues.

While most development efforts focus on prevention and care, credit union services can also mitigate the impact of the pandemic on members and their families. A new WOCCU program in Kenya will help create individual development accounts for education—grants deposited into a child’s savings account. Additionally, farmers will have access to agricultural loans and training to help build rural infrastructure that will increase income-generating opportunities.

“You see an extraordinary resilience, courage and generosity in people who are fighting for survival,” Lewis said, emphasizing that our response is still not enough. He challenged not only governments, but each of us to look at the realities of HIV/AIDS to recognize how we can meet the needs of those realities and most importantly, to act on changing the course for the future. ■

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