



MALAWI FINAL COMMUNIQUE

"Stronger, more visionary and outspoken leadership must come from the continent most affected by this epidemic."

May 31, 2010

We, the Champions, congratulate Malawi leadership for making progress in reducing HIV prevalence. We, particularly, applaud the leadership of His Excellency President Bingu wa Mutharika that is demonstrated by his unwavering commitment to the fight against this epidemic.

We note that Malawi has reduced HIV prevalence rates from 16% to 12% and encourage the leadership to persist and persevere until we have zero new infections, at the latest by 2015.

In addition, Malawi is successfully offering free antiretroviral treatment to about 350,000 or 66% of its citizens in need of treatment, at a time when availability of resources is most uncertain. The challenge now is that for every person receiving treatment, two more persons are infected.

HIV continues to be a common threat to all of us in Southern Africa. And, although we are making remarkable progress, we still have a lot to do, to rid ourselves of the unfortunate distinction

of being the countries with the highest HIV prevalence in the world.

Yet, there are signs that some of our leaders and people are seemingly getting weary and discouraged. Complacency is beginning to set in; when we are not out of the woods yet. We have not conquered AIDS; but only just stabilised the situation, at the most. We run the risk of regressing on some of the already hard-earned successes.

Notwithstanding the remarkable successes already achieved in Malawi, HIV infections are still unsustainably high. Almost a million people are already living with HIV, while about 70,000 people continue to be infected annually. It is now more imperative than ever before that we stop new infections.

We note with appreciation that Malawi has reduced mother-to-child transmission to 14%. Yet, only 39% of HIV-positive pregnant women received ARVs to reduce the risk of mother-to-child transmission in 2009. In the same year, only 34% of children infected received ARV treatment.

The Champions therefore urge Malawi leadership to continue to work diligently to save the lives of children and their mothers. We certainly have the power to provide a safer world for them.

Leadership is also critically needed to end the region-wide HIV-perpetuating behaviour of multiple concurrent partnerships, which is also occurring in the context of low and inconsistent use of condoms.

In Malawi, it is estimated that at least 27% of men and 8% of women currently engage in this risky practice. The leadership is encouraged to unite and enlighten our people of the dangers of multiple concurrent sexual partnerships. It should be reduced or done under less risky situations if it cannot be eliminated.

In Malawi, as elsewhere in the region, we can also reduce the spread of HIV through male medical circumcision. While not a bullet-proof protection against HIV, circumcision has been proven to reduce HIV infection by up to 60%. And yet, only 27% of adult males in Malawi are circumcised.

We therefore encourage the leadership in Malawi to promote medical male circumcision, in collaboration with traditional leaders, amongst others.

Sustainability of the national response in Malawi, as it is in all countries, is critical to winning the war against HIV and AIDS. Financing of the HIV national response remains extremely externally dependent, with more than 90% externally funded. With global shrinkages of resources, the Malawi response has become very vulnerable, a situation which could potentially slow down implementation, as well as compromise the quality of critical interventions.

We urge leadership to diversify the resource mobilisation base through, among others, ensuring greater efficiencies. As part of the sustainability drive, we appreciate the elaborate response structures Malawi currently has in place.

Creating an enabling legal environment is also critical to the HIV response. A lot of work has been done with regard to the development of HIV and AIDS legislation. However, some aspects of the proposed legislation such as criminalising HIV transmission or criminalisation of most-at-risk populations, including homosexuals, may be counterproductive.

As Champions, we believe that decriminalising HIV transmission or exposure serves a public health or HIV prevention function. We therefore suggest that criminalisation of HIV transmission is limited to the intentional transmission of HIV.

We urge the leadership to continue fighting stigma and discrimination. Discrimination may discourage people from HIV testing, thus contributing towards further spread. It is therefore important to expand and accelerate voluntary counselling and testing by regularly implementing the “know your status” campaign, nationally. The national leadership is encouraged to test with the people. Nobody is obliged to disclose.

Last, but certainly not least, we urge the leadership to work together to sensitize the people on some cultural practices that are promoting the spread of the virus. For instance, certain cultural practices such as wife inheritance and sexual cleansing may need to be discontinued. While these practices may have worked in the past, they now only serve to hurt or kill our people.

We take this opportunity to express our gratitude for the warm welcome we received in Malawi. Your generosity and your

courtesy explain why Malawi is fondly referred to as the Warm Heart of Africa.