



Different groups of HIV/AIDS activists marching during the one million HIV Test Campaign on the World AIDS Day official launch in Masaka town

The world has set an ambitious goal of ending AIDS by 2030. As we mark World AIDS Day, Richard Wetaya asked the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV and AIDS (UNAIDS) country director Karusa Kiraqu, how Uganda is performing in this regard and what needs to be done to make the aspiration a reality among other related issues

UNAIDS boss: Fast-track HIV response

In your assessment, how is Uganda performing in keeping with the UNAIDS' declaration on ending AIDS by 2030?

Uganda is making considerable progress, but the fact that there were 52,000 new infections in its population last year means there is still a lot of leeway to be made. The 52,000 translates into 1000 people a week and that is a huge number of infections. It is not a number to be comfortable with. In order for Uganda to reach the 2030 goal, there is need to fast track and accelerate the response and in many respects, that is what is being done with the Presidential Fast Track Initiative. If you look at new infections among children, Uganda did very well. New infections reduced from 40,000 in 2009 to 4,600 now. That is a reduction of about 90% and that puts Uganda on track in as far as ending infections among children is concerned.

How best can we scale up the empowerment of vulnerable young persons in Uganda with actionable information on HIV?

Information is definitely the key to controlling an epidemic. What is needed to empower young people is to ensure that they have appropriate information for their age. Young people need information and services. They need an enabling environment in health care; an environment devoid of discrimination and stigma. Giving information tailored to different age groups is very important. That is why UNAIDS is pushing for sexuality-based education to be reinstated in schools after its ban last year.

Briefly give us an insight into the UNAIDS 2016-2021 "My health, My right strategy"

UNAIDS IS PUSHING FOR SEXUALITY-BASED EDUCATION TO BE REINSTITATED IN SCHOOLS AFTER ITS BAN LAST YEAR

It basically means that people world over have a right to good quality, accessible and affordable healthcare. It also means that the "powers that be" and societies across the world should work to ensure that their people's rights to good health are recognised.

From your wealth of experience, what do you consider to be the most challenging aspect in the fight against HIV?

The biggest challenge in the fight against AIDS has to be complacency. There are plenty of examples in the world that show that communities, implementers, donors and individuals' complacency can play havoc with the fight against HIV. Lack of prioritisation in health funding is also another challenge. Health in many African countries, Uganda inclusive, is not prioritised because it is not seen as a sector that brings in money for the country.

Uganda has scored highly in reducing mother to child transmission of HIV. What lessons can other countries still grappling with high prevalence of that mode of transmission pick from Uganda?

Uganda has had an incredible level of political and financial investment in the PMTCT (prevention of mother to child transmission) programme. Its PMTCT interventions in resource limited settings are laudable. The leadership provided especially by the first lady has been consistent and sustained; resulting in multitudes of mothers receiving effective regimens of ARV's for PMTCT.

There are other countries working hard as Uganda but their PMTCT programmes are not as solid as Uganda's and that is because they are not providing effective treatment and are also not injecting in enough financial resources into their PMTCT programs.

What are your thoughts on the Presidential fast track initiative on ending HIV as a public health threat in Uganda?

The Presidential Initiative is a fantastic framework that will stand



The Joint United Nations Programme on HIV and AIDS (UNAIDS) country director Karusa Kiraqu acknowledges Uganda's positive steps in reduced infection rates, but urges all stakeholders to add more effort to attain the 2030 goal of ending AIDS in the world

in a good stead for Uganda as it looks to ending AIDS by 2030. But support from all stakeholders will be of paramount importance if it is to succeed.

From your assessment, what is the cost of the HIV/AIDS pandemic on the Ugandan economy?

At least 5% of the national budget will need to be put to health, if Uganda is to adequately tackle the AIDS epidemic. At present, Uganda is nowhere close to providing the internal funding needed. 15% is what is recommended to reach the recommended health funding

threshold in every country.

Millions of dollars have been put into research for an AIDS cure, how close are we to finding a cure? What gives you such optimism?

There is reason to be optimistic, though there is no cure yet. Scientists have come to understand the body and the virus much better and that in many respects is progress. Scientists have for example, deduced that if you attack the virus much earlier with powerful targeted drugs, you can be able to get rid of it before it actually has a chance to react or spread through the body.