

Time to reflect on what has really gone wrong: Muyanja Ssenyonga

The scourge surely has its grip strengthened since it was identified in late 1970s and early 1980s. Living the scientific intricacies to those with such credentials and leanings, one can not but implore some reflections on the decimating, disillusioning, deranging, crippling trail of the Aids pandemic and its cohort Human immune deficiency virus HIV condition. It is indisputable that despite all attempts to curb and curb it, the Aids pandemic still retains its stature as one of the most deadly harbingers of mortality to the young and old, to the rich and poor, to the scholarly and the riff-raff. This forlorn and dismal characteristic has been retained 'thanks' to its ability to baffle researchers in as diverse fields as chemical engineering, medicine, molecular biology, biotechnology, and virology, to mention just a mere handful of bodies involved. The more research is made into the HIV lifecycle, the more dreadful and melancholy descends on those who are directly involved in the research and definitely, the desperate millions of the Aids victims tenuously hanging to life. For some no breakthrough can undo the danger already done, for others some hope to extend their dear life by at least some weeks, months, and, who knows, years, even.

Some efforts have borne fruit, nonetheless. Advances in research have made possible the emergence of drugs with the capability to prolong the Aids victims, and some insulate the fetus from the mortal virus carried in the mother's blood. Yet even on this front, the virulence and ability of the Aids virus to mutate still stands in the way towards the development of more effective and general drugs applicable to all Aids victims in all areas wherever they maybe, sending them to resign themselves to fate. For those with the luck to have been born in developed countries, the Aids victims have higher chances of hanging around somewhat longer as the strength of the economies provide sufficient funds to acquire such palliatives, so to speak. Not so the victims inhabiting the length and breadth of the developing world, where owing to insufficiency of funds, lack of political will, sheer indifference, and sometimes being overwhelmed by enormity of the impact, most governments seem to be incapable of doing much, at least by the look of things!

What cannot escape the observer is the lackluster involvement of the public sector in efforts to deal with the scourge. This is evidenced by the paltry sums allocated to public research in developing and developed countries alike, tailored towards the discovery of the vaccine and cure of HIV and Aids. The result has been the almost perfect monopoly of research on Aids related issues by private pharmaceutical and research laboratories, which has meant that all existing drugs on Aids related ailments are patented to private enterprises. The cost of such drugs is far out of reach for millions of the most needy Aids victims in the third world! This underlies the current saga on Aids related drugs, pitting the developing countries, where most of the world's Aids victims strive to keep alive with pharmaceutical Companies, arguing for a reduction on prices in their economies or the permission to produce generic equivalents, which would be within reach of their citizenry. Contrary to expectations, developed countries haven't bought that idea, with the consequence that developing countries, at least the serious ones, are in a cul de sac to renegade on intellectual property and patent rights and go ahead to produce the generic versions of Aids related groups without approval of patent rights holders enabling them to reduce the suffering of their destitute millions and then pay the price of strong and punitive reprisals from developed country governments. Apparently, not even on this seemingly altruistic endeavor can the interests of the developing and developed world meet. In the meantime millions are added to the list of the infected, the endangered and the dead. Yet the somber tale of the Aids blight is bedeviled by more stunning revelations. At the time when countries should put aside as much funds as possible to safeguard the un-infected, one is shocked at the decision made by one African government to abandon the policy of providing condoms free of charge to its highly vulnerable citizens, and this in a country where tax payers' money sublimine in mystery! Perhaps for such a government, the best way of reducing government expenditure is to reduce the number of mouths to feed, quite a sordid and blood curdling proposition, if there was ever one. If you thought the foregoing proposition a spine chiller, maybe it is because you are a novice in public affairs. Many a country resolves to conceal the true state of the Aids situation in their countries fearing that publicity might endanger the money-spinning tourism industry. Such a policy doesn't only provide soft and easy cracks in society for Aids to deliver its deadly blows, but also justifies government's mild attention and expenditure towards the Aids cause. Convinced things are under control, tourists flood in, and awash with their cash of course enjoy themselves, in big way, enabling the Aids scourge to find new territories in the bodies of naive visitors! Such is the mischief and foul machination of some of our leaders today that human safety is compromised by sheer economic gain. Well, maybe such an idea sounds far off the mark in this age of national interests!

Despite serious and sustained efforts to enlighten the world's citizens about the dangers involved, there are still many people flirting with the idea that the Aids scourge may not be real after all. Those espousing such views range from the respected, well read state officials in some countries to the dejected and ignorant delinquents, on the margin, or marginalized by, society. Surely it maybe difficulty for some to comprehend the virulence and 'omnipotence' of the Aids pandemic if one has never been a witness to the suffering, pain, helplessness, despondence of its victims. Yet by the time one encounters such a reality, it is too late for precaution, since the virulence and inconspicuousness of the scourge precludes any earlier detection. In a word, by the time people get to realize the danger many are already victimized.

Aids has been with us for quite long, yet the scourge is regarded as if many of its sufferers opt for it, which underlies wanton stigma, to which many of its victims are exposed across our societies. That attitude is attributed to the fact that most Aids victims contract it through indulging in sex, which many societies consider off-limits to other 'outside' parties, save the two partners involved. Yet others hold the view that the Aids scourge is caused by irresponsible sex, which is why some religious heads discourage state provision of safe-sex gadgets to the zealous millions equating such a practice, noble as it is, to encouraging free sex. Those who are affected are considered as immoral and impervious to consistent sermons, thus deserve what they get! The very individuals suffering from Aids lose all the hope they have in life, feel disillusioned, and dejected considering themselves failures, which attitude doesn't make their health condition any better. Yet Aids, in some respects, is not dissimilar to other virulent scourges that have wreaked havoc on mankind over time. The plague, Small pox are some few examples out of along list of scourges that almost threatened the eradication of mankind, yet they were never treated victims as 'his or her own fault.' Both state and religion should muster world resources to counter Aids, rather than taking diametrically opposite stances. More resources are needed, so is the pertinence and potency of the sermons. Convinced believers should be good abstainers, and that should be the preachers' main goal! Governments, in developed and developing world should put the health of their constituency at the forefront, not economic again. Cultural re-thinking about it all should come in too. This is vital as long as the vaccine let alone the cure is still elusive as it was a decade ago.