

# Although we celebrate victory in the Aids war, we have not won



OTUMA ONGALO

**T**his year's World Aids Day was marked with pomp and pageantry against a backdrop of sombre reality.

However, the occasion's glamour clouded the fact that the Aids scourge remains a great danger in Kenya. It clouded the fact that many anti-Aids initiatives are mere lip service and are shrouded in mega-scandals.

The true face of the scourge was lost in the din of celebrations.

We saw colourfully resplendent individuals in energetic march-pasts while individuals who represent the true face of the scourge withered in hospitals, slums and far-flung villages. Many of them, too weak to raise a finger and too poor to afford ARVs, would not understand the festive aura. They would not understand why they should celebrate while their hope is fast fading.

As they wither, enterprising Kenyans have found a way of turning their plight into a fortune. Individuals who only a few years ago could not make ends meet now live in palatial

mansions and drive top of the range cars as a living testimony of their contribution in the anti-Aids crusade.

We have run short of names for NGOs established to wage campaigns against HIV/Aids. While some have made remarkable contributions, others are busy reaping from the miseries of millions of victims.

Despite the sad tales associated with the epidemic, it has now almost been romanticised in some NGO quarters in the name of fighting stigma. To some individuals, joining anti HIV/Aids campaign is a lucrative venture. The message that HIV/Aids is just like any other disease has been preached countless that the prospects of contracting it no longer instil fear.

We can bury our heads in sand but this will not end the pandemic. We must confront it head on and fight it – the right way – with dedication.

Many decades since the first case was detected in Kenya, millions of shillings are still being wasted in five-star hotels' conference rooms.

The war should now move to uncharted village paths and slums, where greater danger lurks.

Awareness and prevention campaigns have been outstanding but we should not forget that millions are already infected and need care. That is when we can genuinely celebrate.

Started on December 1, 1988, one of the key objectives of World Aids Day is to remind people that HIV has not gone away, and that there are many things still to be done. And there is quite a lot to be done apart from fighting stigma and flaunting statistics

about reduced infection rates. Watching the celebrations, one would have been mistaken to believe that the war against Aids has been won.

The media were awash with stories of individuals who have scaled ladders of successes despite being HIV positive. However, that was just one side of the coin – the rich, who lead normal lives courtesy of access to ARVs, awareness and nutritional supplements, among many other things. And they are hardly one per cent of ordinary citizens living with HIV/Aids.

Hardly had the World Aids Day celebrations' dust settled when the Government announced that it was too broke to help children infected or affected by HIV/Aids.

Medical Assistant Minister Danston Mungatana confessed that low budgetary allocation to his ministry means the Government cannot expand the anti-retroviral programme.

The irony is that only recently, Kenya was embroiled in controversy for failure to account for billions of shillings provided by the Global Fund to boost the war against HIV/Aids.

The controversy partly contributed to the rejection of funding proposal for Round 8 – worth Sh24 billion and is also likely to deal a blow to the Round 9 proposal.

At risk are about 230,000 individuals who are on the antiretroviral therapy and other programmes in the anti HIV/Aids campaign.

The writer is The Standard's Production and Quality Senior Editor  
oongalo@eastandard.net

Daily Nation  
GAM Dec  
1914