

LIVING POSITIVELY

Now is the time to lead from the front

As World Aids Day is marked next week, what gains can we say have been championed by our leaders?

Next Monday the world will mark the annual World Aids Day (WAD). But this time it will be no ordinary celebration. It will be the WAD's 20th anniversary, which makes it especially sentimental to me because that is how long I have been living with HIV.

But that's besides the point. What concerns me is the theme for this year's WAD: "Stop Aids, keep the promise – leadership." This tells me there's a leadership vacuum as far as advocating for the rights of people living with HIV (PLWHs) is concerned. And this vacuum doesn't only have to do with the half-hearted political will, but also our personal contribution – or lack thereof.

At the beginning of this year, I said I was concerned that there was not a single PLWH in Parliament. Some people thought I was blowing hot and cold over nothing. Well, WAD's 2008 theme has vindicated me.

On a different note, but still on the issue of leadership, there are people who practically dump their loved ones who are living with HIV at our rescue centres. This has been an issue for a long time, and you would think that with the changing attitudes towards HIV, people would know that care and support begin at home. This year's theme doesn't spare them either.

I know we've carved a niche in caring for and supporting people who are infected or affected by HIV. However, in our work with communities, we always remind them that they can't dump the entire responsibility in our laps and bolt.

"I tell you, these guys are getting a lot of money from donors to take care of our people who are sick and poor, so why should I bother to follow up on my sister-in-law who is admitted at their centre?"

I overheard someone say this during one of our community outreaches and I had to restrain myself from giving her a piece of my mind.

"The WAD campaign also calls on all sectors of society such as families, communities and civil society organisations – rather than just governments – to take the initiative and provide leadership on Aids," the campaign bulletin I was forwarded said in part, making me think they had taken the words out of my mouth.

In places where communities lead the way, our work has been a bit simpler because we've served as facilitators and given needs-specific training to mitigate their challenges. That's why we need to change our attitude, so that people don't depend on non-governmental organisations to provide fish for them even after they've been taught how to fish.

We never learn

Although we never learn, history has taught us, especially in this country, that if we leave all our affairs in the hands of our politicians, we'll only have ourselves to blame. There's no better time for us to rise and take up leadership, now that financial support and the accompanying global goodwill from the Global Fund hangs in the balance.

In some quarters of the HIV sector, people perceive me as an iron lady because I'm always rolling up my sleeves and pushing for things to be done, sometimes even stepping on the toes of the high and mighty. Experience has taught me that sitting and waiting yields no results. I believe in leading from the front.

What's more, my work is a matter of life and death. I always imagine one more child being orphaned while we wait for a fat, bored bureaucrat to sign on the dotted line so we can access life-prolonging antiretroviral drugs to help a poor, single mother living with HIV see her child through school. And it has taught me that leadership isn't given: it must be demanded, sometimes at high cost.

"WAD's 20th anniversary marks progress but no solution. In the midst of a global financial crisis, leaders must deliver on their Aids promises or hard-fought gains will be lost," the campaign bulletin further states.

Leaders aren't necessarily born. Some of us were thrust, kicking and screaming, to the forefront of this campaign. And over the past two decades, I've come across people, largely unsung, who are trail blazers, albeit unwittingly. I've seen widows, widowers, orphans and grandparents providing direction and ensuring their loved ones survive the vagaries of HIV.

Has your MP done a disappearing act, forgetting his electioneering promise to give PLWHs' issues a priority? Or, do you think NGOs are doing a shoddy job?

Here's the chance to show your mettle. Next Monday, get in the driver's seat. There's space there for you. Who knows, 20 years from now, people will be saying it was your drive and direction that took this campaign to a whole new level.
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