**October 18, 2011**

**Today, I choose to be grateful**

By ASUNTA WAGURA

I recently sat down, mentally, and did what we in the NGO circles called an M&E (monitoring and evaluation) about the strides our nation had made in response to HIV.

From the “vantage point” of an activist, it is easy to rubbish all the good things that have happened to the HIV community and the extensive swathes of ground we have covered in the past few years.

We count costs so much, hitting our calculators like crazy, that we forget to count our blessings. When one is involved in activism, all one’s barrels are pointed at the things that are going wrong and must be made right as soon as yesterday. We hardly have time to pause on our oars and say, “Good stuff.”

It was just the other day that antiretroviral drugs cost an arm and a leg. ARVs were the preserve of the moneyed people and we had to take to the streets and engage in numerous court battles to make the dream of access come true.

In fact, my first regimens of ARVs were paid for by a multinational drug company, and were it not for them, (and God’s grace) I believe I would not be alive today.

Then, it grieved me to no end to watch so many of our members succumb to HIV-related complications when I knew, for instance, that a septrin prophylaxis would keep death at bay.

I would look at what other countries were doing, how far ahead they seemed to be, and how far behind we were lagging, and I would be afraid that we would not see any meaningful gains in our lifetimes.

Since I started going to Southern Sudan and seeing the lack of basic health facilities, I have had a reality check. In my line of work, I have travelled to so many counties in our country and I have been blessed to see what other countries are doing.

But being in Southern Sudan continues to teach me invaluable lessons.

Mainly, it teaches me to appreciate what I have. It may not be everything, and other countries may be doing better than us, but, let us admit it, there are tonnes of things that we are doing right.

Last week, I told you about a hospital where patients have to cook for themselves. The people there have learned to take the good with the bad. I cannot imagine the same thing happening here. I have never seen patients cook for themselves or fetch water, at least where I have visited in this beautiful country of ours.

A couple of weeks ago, I told you about a Sudanese man who proposed to me, having no idea that I am HIV-positive, and I was afraid to tell him because of what his reaction would be. In our country, almost everyone seems to know I’m living with HIV and it is not that big a deal.

It was not always this way and, in terms of awareness and stigma and discrimination, Southern Sudan is where we were about two decades ago. They just got their independence the other day.

They have a myriad challenges — like the disputed oil-rich region of Abyei — which means that something like stigma and discrimination belong on the back burner.

When we first started out, it seemed like stigma and discrimination were institutionalised. And because we were afraid, we took whatever we were given, with thanks.

And then, as we increased in numbers, we became bolder and took solace in Dr Martin Luther King’s words: “We’re God’s children and we don’t have to live like we’re forced to.”

I think people living with HIV in Southern Sudan are at this point where they are increasing in numbers, and they will be a force to reckon with.

What I have seen in Southern Sudan whenever I travel there has made me a more grateful woman for what we have in Kenya, which we sometimes take for granted.

And that is not to say that, as an HIV community, our work is done. We will only triumph when researchers find a cure and a vaccine to this virus, when that dream of an HIV-free generation is realised.

Still, I am grateful to God that here in Kenya, my doctor is only a telephone call away and I can get my ARV supplies free of charge when I visit the hospital.

*This is the diary of Asunta Wagura, a mother-of-three who tested HIV-positive 24 years ago. She is the executive director of the Kenya Network of Women with Aids (KENWA). asuntawagura@hotmail.com*