



Address Delivered

by

H.E. Dr, Negaso Gidada,
President of the
Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia

at the

African Development Forum 2000
AIDS: the Greatest Leadership Challenge

3 December 2000
Addis Ababa

Mr. Chairman,

Honourable Heads of State and Government,

H.E.Dr. Salim Ahmed Salim,
Secretary General of the OAU,

Distinguished Participants,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me a great pleasure to welcome you all in Addis Ababa for this regional gathering, which is being convened to address the crucial development challenge that our continent is facing as a result of the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

The United Nations Economic Commission for Africa has indeed made a great achievement in creating the African Development Forum (ADF) last year with a view to tackling critical development issues. The ADF meets annually and is a process to establish an African-led and African driven development agenda. The first Forum was held in October 1999 and deliberated on the challenge posed to Africa by globalization and the information age.

Organized under the theme of “AIDS: the Greatest Leadership Challenge”, ADF 2000 is the second in the series and is devoted to addressing the HIV/AIDS challenge to development. Let me thank at this juncture the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, and in particular Dr. K.Y. Amoako, for taking the initiative to organise this conference. There is no doubt that this conference is a very important and laudable step towards ensuring that the agenda of combating HIV/AIDS is taken with due seriousness at the African and international levels. I wish also to thank ECA's partners for the initiative that they have taken to assist in the fight against this terrible scourge.

The Theme of this Forum is therefore paramount to Africa's development. This Forum is held at a crucial moment when the HIV/AIDS epidemic is wreaking havoc on our human and material resources. Thus, this Forum is expected to identify the major obstacles that have undermined progress in the effort we are making to arrest the spread of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. The Forum is also expected to probe into the type of leadership required for success in the fight against the scourge that goes far beyond the political level, and to review the scope of cooperation that may be required between government, civil society, the private sector and the international development community in this regard.

Our joint effort to spearhead the fight against HIV/AIDS should enable us to agree on broad strategies for tackling the challenge, and should encourage our development partners to scale up their interventions and to positively impact on our national development efforts.

Needless to say, the profound disruption of our societies due to impoverishment, austerity and conflict has helped create the conditions in which the virus can thrive. It is in conditions of migration, disruption of families, mass displacement and civil war that HIV/AIDS has taken hold, and is devastating the very fabric of our societies.

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

The HIV/AIDS epidemic is taking a devastating toll in terms of human suffering. It is jeopardising economic growth, development prospects and political stability, especially in sub-Saharan Africa. Given the degree to which HIV/AIDS is undermining progress in development, it is no longer merely a health problem, but poses a major development crisis to the continent.

With one-tenth of the global population living in it, sub-Saharan Africa now accounts for 25.3 million of the 36.1 million people infected with HIV/AIDS globally. This figure amounts to nearly one in every ten African adults. What is more, Africa bears 70 percent of the adults and 80 percent of the children living with HIV, and has buried three-quarters of the more than 20 million people worldwide who have died of AIDS since the epidemic began.

It is therefore evident that the impact of HIV/AIDS on the socio-economic situation of our countries is enormous.

It is also obvious that large numbers of children are losing their parents at their tender ages and before completing school. This phenomenon has resulted in a situation whereby the elderly, who are supposed to be supported by extended family systems, are now becoming the ones to take care of their grand-children, the AIDS orphans, with their very weak capacity to shoulder such a heavy burden.

Accordingly, what has been reiterated by so many is absolutely correct and that Africa - where so many lives have been lost and economies endangered – risks a heavily mortgaged future if the disease that has imperilled so many cannot soon be brought under control.

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thanks to our culture of communal life, we have so far not completely lost momentum to take care of people living with HIV/AIDS. However, this does not mean that our efforts to take care of HIV/AIDS victims have not been challenged from an increasingly emerging problem of exclusion and stigmatisation of people living with HIV/AIDS. This emerging problem of exclusion should not be left to prevail upon our culture of communal life. In this regards, the role of religious leaders and civil society can make a big difference by way of changing the way people think and act in relation to people living with HIV/AIDS.

To the extent that HIV/AIDS has made us more vulnerable than others because of the nature of the African political economy, we all must take for exploring more effective ways and means of tackling the problem. Citizens, Community leaders, civil society organisations, religions organisations, trade unions, businesses - in fact every part of our societies have responsibilities to become part of a grand African coalition against HIV/AIDS. No one should be demobilised from this collective struggle.

Youth, women and people living with HIV/AIDS should be at the forefront of this coalition. This is a multi – faceted struggle: a struggle for human rights, the empowerment of women, for the restoration of basic health and education services, for equitable development – in fact, it is a struggle for the future of the African continent.

Therefore, the situation makes it imperative that African leaders, in government and at all levels of society, spearhead the fight against HIV/AIDS. In this regard, ADF 2000 is primarily envisaged to serve as a launching pad for renewed and sustainable commitment from African leaders to make HIV/AIDS a top priority in their development agenda and to invest substantially in the fight against the deadly scourge. Thus, leaders have the responsibility to ensure that there is a collective effort to respond sufficiently to the needs of people infected and communities affected by HIV/AIDS. However, there is no gainsaying that the problem demands the collective responsibility of all.

If, on the other hand, we do not work together, if we fail to collaborate in looking for remedies, AIDS in Africa will continue to spread and continue to kill. I expect that you will hear in the Forum in the coming days that the virus spreading in this part of the continent is causing one of the fastest growing AIDS epidemics in the world. Hence, the expansion of national AIDS activities in Africa can make an important contribution towards reducing the human suffering and halting the reversal of human, social and economic development on the continent.

Excellencies
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Many African countries have already developed national strategies and programmes aimed at preventing the spread of HIV/AIDS. In this respect, the Ethiopian Government has developed important policies on health as well as on HIV/AIDS with a view to mitigating the devastating impacts of the pandemic. What is more, a National AIDS Council representing a wide spectrum of our society has been set up. The Secretariat of the Council was established centrally at the national level and started its work by organising councils at the regional, zonal and at the grass roots level.

A modest budget was allocated by the Ethiopian Government for the Council to undertake its activities. However, cooperation from the international community is indispensable for the continuation of these activities, and we hope that help in this direction will be forthcoming. There is no doubt that this is also true with respect to other African countries. We have to do our part and that is where the most critical work needs to be done. But international co-operation is also indispensable for our success.

Let me conclude by expressing the hope that this Forum will be a platform upon which African leaders and all the other stakeholders will reaffirm their commitment for concrete actions and that these actions

will contribute towards overcoming the challenges facing our continent – a challenge which is obviously enormous.

It is therefore with full realisation of how important this Forum is that I will express to you my best wishes for the success of your deliberations and assure you of the full cooperation of the Government of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia in the discharge of your important responsibilities.

I thank you!