



TOWARDS A MORE EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP RESPONSE TO THE HIV/AIDS PANDEMIC



Presentation by Dr. Kenneth Kaunda

Madame Chairperson,
Distinguished Heads of State,
Honourable Ministers,
Your Excellencies,
Distinguished Delegates and Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Allow me to pay special tribute to the organisers of ADF 2000 for enabling us to meet here in Addis Ababa. To you I say thank you very much. To you Mr. Secretary General of the Economic Commission of Africa. I can foresee your organisation quickly taking on this new challenge posed by HIV/AIDS. You may soon become the Economic and Aids Commission for Africa. I am sure there will be many retiring Heads of State joining me in retirement next year both in Africa and abroad. I can see all of us applying for jobs in the new Economic and Aids Commission for Africa which will emerge. And I am sure I'll qualify in spite of a competition.

It is a singular honour and privilege for me to address you today on a matter that so deeply affects the whole world, but especially the people of Sub-Saharan Africa.

For almost two decades now, we have been confronting the HIV/AIDS pandemic. At first we did not know what to do. It has taken us a long time to recognise the scale of the disaster we faced. It has taken us a long time to recognise the deviousness of the disease that infects silently, works secretly, and destroys ruthlessly.

Our efforts over the years have met with some success. Overall prevalence rates have been greatly reduced in countries such as Thailand and Uganda. The spread of the disease has been checked in Senegal. There has been a decline in the proportion of new infections in teenage girls in Zambia. There has been significant advance in controlling mother-to-child transmission. People living with the disease can now receive life prolonging treatment except that prohibitively high costs prevent the vast majority of infected persons in developing countries from having access to this treatment. To the shame of the entire world, they are too poor to buy life sustaining treatment.

But in spite of the progress that has been made, two decades later, 20 years after its first emergence, the HIV/AIDS epidemic still rolls on. It is still taking a frightful toll. It is still sucking

away the life and vitality of our families, communities, nations, continent, at an alarming rate.

For me, one horrendous, frightening figure sums it all up: in the first decade of this century, AIDS will bring about more deaths in Africa than all the armed conflicts world-wide of the entire 20th century. In ten short years, one continent will experience more human devastation than the entire world experienced in a century that knew global warfare on an unprecedented scale as well as increasingly frequent territorial and guerrilla wars.

Madame Chairperson,

- **We cannot accept** that it should be so.
- **We cannot allow** Mother Africa to be raped in this way by HIV/AIDS.
- **We must take action** to prevent these deaths.
- **We must take action** to provide treatment and care for people living with HIV/AIDS.
- **We must take action** to respond creatively and dynamically to the needs of the millions of children that this disease has already left as orphans.
- **We must take action** to prevent the further spread of this disease so that in future there will be no such person as an AIDS orphan, and we will be able to wipe the very term out of our vocabulary.
- **We must take action** to ensure that all the resources of medical science are used to eradicate mother-to-child transmission.

- **We must take action** to empower our women economically, socially, sexually so that they cease to be so vulnerable to HIV infection.
- **We must take action** to eradicate the all-embracing poverty which is so fertile a breeding ground for AIDS, which feeds on AIDS and is fed by AIDS.

Madame Chairperson, We must take action and take it NOW!

In the words of my good friend Nelson Mandela, *'the challenge is to move from rhetoric to action and action of an unprecedented intensity and scale'*.

We have had many good words. But too often those good words are like the music we hear in supermarkets or hotel elevators: nice to hear at the time, quickly forgotten afterwards. It must not be the same with this African Development Forum 2000. This is not a Forum for fine words. It is a Forum for action. The time for action is now and right now.

What, then, must we do to move towards a more effective response to the HIV/AIDS pandemic?

Madame Chairperson, I have already referred to AIDS taking more African lives than all the wars of the 20th century. Let us strike back, then, by declaring war, total war, on HIV/AIDS -not a

national war that appears only in speeches at conferences and meetings, but a war that becomes part and parcel of the life of this continent, of every nation, every community and family, of every individual. This is a just war. All the right is on our side. There is no right, none whatsoever, on the HIV/AIDS side. In this war, we must win. In this war, if we are all committed and dedicated, we will win. WE WILL WIN.

In this age of information technology, we are used to seeing the three letters W W W. Madame Chairperson, Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen, let W W W be our driving force, our inspiration in this war with AIDS- W W W –WE WILL WIN!

In a conventional war, the role of leaders is crucial. National and political leaders eat, sleep and think the war. It tops their agendas. They dedicate resources to it. They energise civil and military personnel to sacrifice and give of their best in the struggle. They visibly build morale visiting the battlefronts, meeting the troops, visiting the sick, comforting the bereaved.

Can our national and political leaders in our AIDS stricken countries not do as much leading: energising, visiting, committing resources, comforting, expressing a nation's total commitment to controlling this dreaded disease?

In conventional wars, other leaders also play their part. Religious and cultural leaders work with the people, mobilise and inspire them, pray with them for those who are fighting and for success in the struggle, showing solidarity with those suffering from the effects of war and those who are bereaved.

All credit goes to religious and cultural leaders who have done so much in the struggle against AIDS. But the challenge to them is to do more, to speak to their people more openly, ceaselessly and fearlessly about the epidemic, about reducing stigma, about preventing transmission, about love and care for orphans and for people living with HIV/AIDS, and to mobilise their people to take action in all those areas.

The challenge is there also for other leaders in society to take action: executives in the civil service and private sector, civic leaders, media managers, heads of business and captains of industry, heads of institutions of learning, military leaders, women leaders, leaders of special interest groups, youth leaders, those from NGOs and various partnerships. For each one of them the challenge is there: to engage with all the moral, human and financial resources at their disposal to prevent HIV transmission, to provide care and support to mitigate the impact, to gain lasting control over this hitherto uncontrollable disease.

Madame Chairperson, You cannot conduct a war if your war-chest, your treasury, is almost empty. The poverty of the majority of our countries enfeebles our ability to conduct a war against HIV/AIDS on the necessary scale. This war needs more resources.

The tragic thing is that Africa has the necessary resources but is not allowed to use them in the struggle against HIV/AIDS, is not allowed to use them to save the lives of Africans. According to UNAIDS, Africa needs \$US 3 billion each year to fight AIDS, but the same Africa pays out \$US 15 billion each year in debt repayments, and then must go cap in hand to the international community to beg for the resources to keep its people alive, to fight the HIV/AIDS and other scourges.

Something is terribly wrong here. The world is denying life to people so that debts can be repaid, financial institutions retain their credit worthiness and banks their profitability. Which comes first, people's lives or debt repayments? The most basic human right is the right to life. The other side of that coin is responsibility, the responsibility of the entire world community to ensure that every man, woman and child enjoys the right to stay alive. Current debt repayment schedules make a mockery of that responsibility.

Madame Chairperson, we need action now on the AIDS crisis. But we also need action now on the debilitating debt crisis that is preventing African countries from being in the driving seat for action against HIV/AIDS.

Madame Chairperson, the real heart of the response to the HIV/AIDS pandemic across Africa is at individual family and community levels. What is occurring at national and indeed international levels is facilitating and enabling. It is making it possible for individuals, families and communities to act. These are the troops in the frontline in the war. In so far as anything is happening, it is largely because of what they are doing.

Hence there is great need to listen to them, to join hands with them, to support them. It is not so much a question of telling them what they should do. In most cases they know this better than we do. It is more a question of helping them do better than what they are already doing and gently giving them a nudge in the right direction.

This means getting resources to them. It means ensuring:

- We ourselves as leaders of our countries must account for any financial resources allocated to the AIDS fight;
- That medical supplies are available to them;

- That drugs for TB and other opportunistic infections are always available at no cost;
- That their work is not blocked by the lack of what they need for home-based care, orphan support or prevention activities;
- That fees and costs do not prevent their sick from getting medicines and attention
- That their orphans are getting schooling
- That their young people are getting life-affirming sexual education;
- That income-generating and microfinancing activities can enable women and men to support themselves and their families in dignity and safety.

Sometimes, Madame Chairperson, I worry that we are so wrapped up in our conferences and strategic plans that we think we have done everything when we have produced our conference reports, established our HIV/AIDS secretariats, developed our strategic plans. These are necessary, yes. But let us never forget that the greater part of the action takes place down there at family and community level, and that it is to this level that our resources must be directed.

Madame Chairperson, if families and communities are the focal points for action in response to HIV/AIDS, we must accept the hard fact that our bureaucracies, procedures and accounting systems must be adjusted to dealing with them, to freeing up the channels so that resources can flow to them quickly. HIV/AIDS is imposing a new

world on us. One element of that new world must be a redesign of our systems and procedures at every level, so that people do not die because bureaucrats do not feel easy dealing with thousands of small organisations and small-scale community responses.

Madame Chairperson,

Your Excellencies,

Distinguished Delegates,

Dear Friends,

As I stand here before you, I would like us to make a pact with ourselves if we are to make a more effective response to the HIV/AIDS pandemic, then there are certain steps we must commit ourselves to take in addition to those I have already outlined:

- **We must unequivocally take action** to prevent mother-to-child transmission;
- At the same time, we must provide therapies that will enable infected mothers to live so that their children will not become orphans;
- **We must reach out** in care, responsibility and love to all persons living with HIV/AIDS, learning from them about it, empowering them to contribute their unique insights to the struggle against the disease, overcoming all discrimination, stigma, silence, shame, secrecy and ostracism;
- **We must step up** dramatically our efforts to eradicate poverty and generate employment;

- **We must make** unprecedented moves towards gender equity and towards giving women power over their personal, sexual and economic lives.
- **We must use** the enormous potential for positive change that resides in our young people, recognising that they are the future;
- **We must make every leader** at every level -national, political, civic, religious, traditional, community, business- accountable for enhancing the response to the epidemic, with each leader coming out into the open at regular intervals and saying, both to those above and to his or her constituents or clients: **'this is what I have done, this is what I have tried to do'**.

Having thrown the gauntlet, I would like to conclude my remarks by thanking all the participants to this Forum for, once again, responding to the cries of Africa. To the Executive secretary of ECA, Mr. K. Y. Amoako, I wish to congratulate you for your foresight in conceiving the ADF. The presence of your many co-operating partners in this Forum is clear testimony to your vision of effective partnership. I Congratulate all of you.

Finally, Madame Chairperson, our people will not judge the African Development Forum 2000 by the things we say and agree upon. They will judge it by the actions we take. The time for talk is over. The time for action has come. That time is now, and right now.

Thank you, and may God bless you all.