

INCLUSION: THE COURAGE TO SHAPE A NEW ERA

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Lilongwe, Malawi

**Opening meeting of the UNAIDS and Lancet
Commission: From AIDS to Sustainable Health**

SPEECH

By: M. Michel Sidibé, Executive Director of UNAIDS

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The courage to shape a new era of inclusion

Your Excellency President Banda, Commissioners, friends, ladies and gentlemen and young people:

Let me begin by saying thank you to President Banda, not just for hosting this important meeting, but also for showing that she is committed to social justice and the redistribution of opportunity. I say that because when I asked her to lead this Commission, she told me, “If it is a commission just to produce a report, I am not willing. But if it is a commission to help save the lives of people on our Continent, and around the world, I am with you.”

She is a tireless champion. She has initiated bold human rights reforms since she took leadership. She is a model for many leaders on this Continent. I was with her yesterday in Abuja when we were addressing the Global Power Women Network of Africa and its partners. She told them, “If you don’t put women at the centre of our approach—if women are not part of our transformative agenda—reaching the goals of 2015 will just be a dream.”

We are in Malawi because your country, after being one of the epicentres of the crisis, is now a model for progress. Your country is showing us how we will be able to end the AIDS epidemic. In Malawi, during the last few years, you have been able to reduce the number of new infections by 73 percent. This is the highest reduction in this region, and one of the highest in Africa. You have been able to increase access to people in need of treatment—500,000 people are now on lifesaving ARVs in Malawi.

This is not just about giving people pills. This is about being part of the social change of your country. This is about enabling people to live lives of quality and not just be suffering in hospital beds. You are helping to change completely the landscape of global health by demonstrating that we can not only save lives, but restore the dignity of people.

I want to mention something that is even more spectacular. During the two years since we launched the Global Plan to eliminate new HIV infections in children and keep their mothers alive, you have been able to increase coverage to prevent mother-to-child transmission by 750 percent. I assure you that the day will soon come when we can say we have a new generation free from HIV. This will start in Malawi, and we will celebrate it.

President Banda has approached key world leaders to join our Commission. My brother, the former President of Botswana Festus Mogae, is with us today, and he is among our high-level Commissioners. His country is also a model. Years ago, many were thinking that Botswana could disappear from the map of Africa because of AIDS. But he was able to transform AIDS policy so that today we can say that Botswana has reached universal access to treatment, and has managed to almost stop transmission of HIV from mother to child. That happened because of his leadership, and I want to recognize that.

Allow me also, Madame Chair, to mention my friend and sister Helen Clark. She is certainly very humble sitting here, but she is the one responsible for making radical changes in policy to protect vulnerable people. I remember traveling with her when she was Prime Minister of New Zealand, and I can tell you that she is courageous. She took the bold step of decriminalizing her country's most-at-risk populations—people who inject drugs and sex workers. Her reforms have enabled us to say that New Zealand is among the countries that have successfully won the fight against HIV/AIDS. And it was because of her, and I want to thank her for joining this Commission.

This Commission was formed at a historic moment. A moment when people—especially young people—are demanding equity. They are demanding social justice. They are demanding human rights. And they are demanding accountability. This is a great moment, because it motivates us to reflect, and to not to be scared. It is the moment for us to shape the future of development. I am sure, under your leadership, President Banda, you will help us to be courageous and not to fear the future but to mold it.

I am sure that this Commission will help us contribute to building this new era that will give us a chance to live in a world without exclusion. A world where no one will be left behind. A world where no one fears exclusion because of stigma, discrimination, criminalization, prejudice, social status or sexual orientation.

When we achieve this, the world will say that the debate started here, and that we were able to be courageous. That we were able to use AIDS as an entry point to bring this transformation.

The post-2015 debate must begin with a new vision—one that is centred around people, not diseases.

Again, I want to thank you, the Government of Malawi, all the people who came today and especially the people we met outside, claiming their right to tell us not to forget about them. That is the duty of the AIDS movement—inclusion.

I am proud to be your servant in your work for this Commission. I will do all I can to make sure that this Commission will be remembered.

Finally, I would like to leave you with the words of Nelson Mandela. This is from the speech he delivered the day he was released from prison in 1990:

“I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons will live together in harmony with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for, and to see realised. But my Lord, if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die.”

With these words of Mandiba, let us make sure that his vision, passion and commitment will inspire the work of this Commission. Let us pray for him.

Thank you.

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The Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) leads and inspires the world to achieve its shared vision of zero new HIV infections, zero discrimination and zero AIDS-related deaths. UNAIDS unites the efforts of 11 UN organizations—UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP, UNDP, UNFPA, UNODC, UN Women, ILO, UNESCO, WHO and the World Bank—and works closely with global and national partners to maximize results for the AIDS response. Learn more at unaids.org and connect with us on Facebook and Twitter.