

# GETTING TO ZERO DEMANDS A COMMITMENT TO COMPASSION

Michel Sidibé, Executive Director of UNAIDS

08 March 2012

Suva, Fiji

**Joint Stakeholders Meeting with President  
Ratu Epeli Nailitikau**

## **SPEECH**

**By:** Michel Sidibé, Executive Director of UNAIDS

**Date:** 08 March 2012

**Place:** Suva, Fiji

**Occasion:** Joint Stakeholders Meeting with President Ratu Epeli Nailitikau

Please check against delivery

### **Getting to zero demands a commitment to compassion**

I am so happy to be here, because President Nailatikau is a true leader. I would not have made this trip if I were not certain that Fiji has a President with a true commitment to the fight against HIV/AIDS.

He put Fiji on the map worldwide during the UN High Level Meeting on AIDS last summer—particularly when negotiating the Declaration of Commitment, which will shape the future of the response for years to come in the General Assembly. But he is more than just a global advocate. He is a leader in transforming the AIDS response in the Pacific region.

Few countries today have been able to deal so well with sensitive issues, like removing travel restrictions. We still have 53 countries in the world where people living with HIV cannot travel freely. But under the leadership of this President, Fiji is no longer among them.

It is so critical that people are not excluded from our response because of their HIV status, their social status or their sexual orientation. There are still 89 countries in the world with homophobic laws. But Fiji has successfully decriminalized same-sex relationships. For me, that is a very important signal—not just for gay men and women, but for the world. If we want to be inclusive, if we want to have a society that is able to transform itself, we must be capable of having compassion and tolerance. That is what the President has shown, and that is why I am here.

### **Women are still the face of HIV**

Today is International Women's Day. So I want to take a few moments to reflect on this epidemic from the perspective of women and girls.

It is a pity that after 30 years, women remain the face of this epidemic. Unfortunately, in most of the places I have been to in this world, women are the ones who are affected most. Too often, they are victims, instead of becoming agents of change. Rather than being leaders, they are the ones experiencing disproportionate levels of infection.

It is not complicated, when you travel throughout the world, to understand why this is. Women often lack access to power. They lack access to opportunity. Unfortunately, in many

**Zero new HIV infections. Zero discrimination. Zero AIDS-related deaths.**

places, they face sexual violence, and no framework is defined or established with strong laws to make sure they are protected.

I was in Lesotho some months ago where I met a young girl, aged 15. She had been raped by an uncle. She was pregnant, and she was HIV-positive. She asked me, "What did I do to deserve this?" Society must not turn away and hide from these tragic but too-common situations. We must put a stop to gender violence.

### **Sexual values**

We need to get very serious about sexuality education. Parents are saying, "We can not talk to our kids." They are saying that there is no clear space for discussing sexuality issues in families "because it is not part of our culture." But they are wrong. Because today, your children have access to other sources of information. And if you do not establish a link between you and them, they will establish a link between themselves and others. And those people will not necessarily transmit the same values you want to transmit.

Education is critical. It must take into account basic life skills, to make sure our young girls are equipped and able to negotiate their sexuality in a responsible manner. If we do not do this—if we do not have a process to create these linkages between HIV, sexual and reproductive health and the rights of women and girls, we will end up having early pregnancy. We will end up having unsafe abortion. We will end up having an increased number of new infections among girls. Any time you miss the opportunity to share that knowledge, to share those skills, you are making girls vulnerable. And when they are vulnerable, they are more likely to become infected, to become pregnant, and to have babies born with HIV.

That is what is happening in many parts of the world, particularly in Africa, from where I have just come. You are lucky in Fiji. You have been able to virtually eliminate the transmission of HIV from mother to child. But in Africa, we still have 400 000 babies born with HIV every year.

This is why it is so important to let young people lead. To make them actors of change. To make sure they are not just passive beneficiaries of our programmes. In this group, levels of sexually transmitted infections can be very high, which opens the door to HIV infection and transmission. So it is important to continue to create space for open, frank dialogue with young people. I am happy that so many are here with us today.

### **Fight aid dependency**

It is critical for Fiji and the other countries of the Pacific to continue to fight against dependency. Too many of these islands rely almost entirely on external sources to fund their AIDS response. We cannot put people on treatment and expect to keep them on it for 30 years if we are depend only on unpredictable, unsustainable funding coming from outside. I am grateful to the Global Fund and to other international donors, but relying on them for 88% of Fiji's AIDS response is a risk too high.

We need to start the discussion on shared responsibility, to make sure that progressively, our own countries are building domestic sources of funding to help themselves in general, but especially for addressing HIV. If we do not we could reverse all of the progress that is happening today. Dependency creates a perilous situation that affects the lives of people—the lives of our families. So we must start thinking about long-term, sustainable new ways of financing this response.

### **Human rights promote protection**

Finally, I want to say this to the President: human rights are at the very centre of the AIDS response. HIV/AIDS is not just a disease—it is a social issue that will never be addressed if we do not think about how to restore dignity to people. If we do not think about social justice or the redistribution of opportunity to people who have none.

AIDS runs rampant when we exclude. When people have to hide themselves because of their social status or their sexual orientation. And that is what is happening around the world. We see it in Eastern Europe and Central Asia—a place where we should have almost zero new infections, but instead we have the fastest-growing epidemic in the world. In the past 10 years, we have seen new infections rise by 250%. Why? Because of laws that criminalize people who inject drugs and people who buy and sell sex.

When I talk about trying to remove those laws, it is not to promote sex work or to promote illegal drug use. It is to promote protection. Because any time people vulnerable to HIV have to hide, they do not have access to services, they are not able to protect themselves and they become infected and transmit the infection.

I have just come from Ghana, where 30% of men having sex with men are infected with HIV. When we analyzed this, the facts were shocking. We found that 60% of them were married, and having children. They had to hide their sexuality because they do not have the means to overcome the social pressures and barriers against homosexuality. They hide themselves because of stigma and discrimination. We cannot afford that.

The Report of the Commission on AIDS in Asia, which I shared with the President this morning, clearly underlines the fact that 50 million women in Asia are at risk of being infected by their intimate partners. Why? Because millions of men are clients of sex workers. And because sex work is criminalized, those clients are hiding, and are not given the information or services to protect themselves or their regular partners from infection.

So it is important to deal with the human rights issue. To make sure that we protect people by creating an enabling environment so that those who use drugs or engage in sex work have access to services that can protect them.

Lastly, I just want to say that we will not win this fight against HIV and AIDS if we do not put the prevention revolution at the centre of our work. And we will not have a prevention revolution if we do not mobilize faith-based organizations. If we do not mobilize young people. If we are not able to build bridges between women's movements and the AIDS movement. If we are not able to create a social movement that mobilizes sport and education to be part of our delivery system.

I want to say again how happy I am to be in Fiji, and to be with your President, who has been such a strong leader for this region and in the world. I would like to ask him to make sure that through his advocacy, we will have zero new HIV infections, zero discrimination and zero AIDS-related deaths in this region. I believe it is possible that this region could be the first to realize our vision of Getting to Zero.

Thank you.

[END]

**Contact**

UNAIDS Geneva | Sophie Barton-Knott | tel. +41 22 791 1697 | [bartonknotts@unaids.org](mailto:bartonknotts@unaids.org)

**UNAIDS**

UNAIDS, the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS, is an innovative United Nations partnership that leads and inspires the world in achieving universal access to HIV prevention, treatment, care and support. Learn more at [unaids.org](http://unaids.org).