

CANGO sings praises for the Swaziland's good story towards combating HIV



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The Swaziland HIV and AIDS Consortium of NGOs and Civil Society Organisations under the auspices of the Coordinating assembly of Non-Governmental Organisations (CANGO) would like to join the nation in expressing our congratulation in the recently launched Swaziland HIV Incident Measurement Survey (SHIMS2) by the Right Honourable Prime Minister, Sibusiso Barnabas Dlamini.

That the HIV incidence has decreased by half and those virally suppressed also improved is great news for the Kingdom of Swaziland. This counts as an achievement for the nation in its fight against HIV/AIDS, a clear demonstration that when leadership at all levels, especially the political leadership, is determined, more can be achieved as a country.

When His Majesty the King, Mswati III declared HIV/AIDS as a national disaster in 1999, this act of courage and leadership galvanised the Government, Non-Governmental Organisations, Faith Based Organisations, Traditional Authorities, the private sector, ordinary citizens, international partners, and people who were already living with HIV and AIDS to take action under the banner “I AIDS Indandzaba Yetfu Sonkhe”.

The Government of Swaziland prioritised the response even in its budget ensuring that the Ministry of Health respond appropriately to the disaster the nation was facing.

We saw this through the creation of The National Emergency Response Council on HIV and AIDS (NERCHA) under the Prime Minister's Office in 2001 and subsequently through an act of Parliament in 2003 to coordinate and facilitate the National Multisectoral HIV/AIDS response.

We also witnessed the global solidarity when the United Nations set up UNAIDS and subsequently the Global Fund to Fight HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. Then the then United States of America, President George W Bush set up The U.S President's

Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), an initiative to combat global HIV/AIDS, TB, and Malaria for hard hit focus countries.

Regional organisations such as the African Union, Southern African Development Community (SADC) also took steps to mobilise resources and expertise in solidarity to fight a common enemy that was threatening to wipe the world.

This Swaziland's good story will not be possible without the role played by international organisations and partners of the government.

We would like to applaud the role that NGOs played in the early 80s when the HIV issue was just emerging as a mysterious disease.

We are also aware of the Government of Swaziland's efforts to work closely with NGOs and Faith Based organisation through the National AIDS Programme (SNAP).

Government ensured that the multisectoral response aimed at the realisation that HIV and AIDS was not just a health problem but a disease making every sector of the society feel the brunt.

NERCHA was then launched to coordinate the HIV and AIDS response which they have done with commitment under leadership of His Excellency the Right Honourable Prime Minister.

After the declaration of HIV and AIDS as a national disaster CANGO responded itself by setting up the very same Swaziland HIV and AIDS Consortium (SHACO) in 1999.

This has been a critical platform where implementing civil society organisations are coordinated, linked with supporting partners to solidify response and act as "a voice of the voiceless".

From donors, a number of programmes were on the ground implemented by members.

Indeed, we appreciate NERCHA for having embraced all sectors including SHACO, Swaziland Network of People Living with HIV/AIDS (SWANEPHA), Alliance of Mayors' Initiative for Community Action Against HIV/AIDS at Local Level (AMICAALL), Swaziland Business Coalition on HIV and AIDS (SWABCHA), and the Church Forum. They provided some funds, guidelines and platforms for joint engagement of these apexes.

The Ministry of Health has remained the bedrock for the responses in the country. They faced enormous challenges but through it all tried their best to provide succour to those who needed support.

We applaud the army of volunteers including the Rural Health Motivators who even without remunerations were able and willing to lend support to the infected and affected some of them risking contracting infections themselves.

We note that the battle is far from over. The good news only serves to galvanise all the actors to continue to do more as big results are being seen. There is no room for complaisance.

Global targets in the fight against HIV are pointing towards the elimination of HIV. The programmatic language now talks of three FREES; which means START FREE – eliminate new HIV infections; STAY FREE – reduce 95% of new infections; and AIDS FREE – provide treatment for all HIV patients.

Government has to continue to pump in more resources as international funding has levelled off and is projected to decline due to competing global problems. More importantly, it is for individuals to take the responsibility to prevent new infections. We can all start by taking a test and commence treatment as soon as possible while there is still time.

Indeed, we call all sing a new song; a song of hope that we can get there – forward ever towards 90-90-90. Backwards never!

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Acts of Faith

Chairperson of the SHACHO