

# Message from the Youth

WORLD AIDS Day  
Monday 1<sup>st</sup> December 2003  
Kampala, Uganda

My name is Luyombya Henry; I am a youth volunteer at TASO. In the past few days, youth from all over the country and Africa have been together sharing and learning about HIV/AIDS in Africa, about what youth are doing, the challenges we face and about what more remains to be done.

Today we are privileged to stand here before you representing the voices of many youth fighting HIV/AIDS, living with HIV/AIDS and thousands more that have died of AIDS.

We need to face the truth! Far too many children and youth are dying from AIDS. We need

to start sitting around together - particularly the youth - but also adults WITH youth. Those who are HIV positive and those who are not, need to speak and work together with honesty, respect and lack of discrimination because we share a common challenge and it is - to defeat HIV/AIDS.

Without honesty and an open approach that welcomes and values all people and accepts the reality of our challenges in fighting HIV/AIDS, we shall remain tormented by the continued loss of loved ones and our failure to make a real and lasting change.

This Mr. President is the message of challenge and hope from the youth to youth but understanding that we cannot win against HIV/AIDS by ourselves, we also have a message

for your Government and all our leaders and parents in Africa.

To the Youth:

We have to take a stand! Although HIV/AIDS affects everyone, it is we, the youth, that are being hit the hardest. We must reach out to one another. We can help each other understand the risk of HIV, fight stigma and discrimination, live safe, make the right decisions and live to our full potential.

But, we must not wait for someone to pay us money or give us all we need in order to get the message out to other youth. All youth must be totally committed to this fight and not merely be involved in "some work against HIV/AIDS". We must take up every opportunity to volunteer using our energy, creativity, skills

and excellent knowledge of our reality as youth, to make a difference. It is this level of dedication that will make a lasting change among youth keeping more of us safer, wiser, healthy and alive.

Youth are the largest and best resource that the world has today to develop our nations into a home that we can all be proud of. We should therefore not wait for the time we are told we will be leaders to arrive. We must start to get involved today, because every day that comes is the future we were told of yesterday. We have a big role to play, so our leadership starts today.

But, in order to be able to do this, we must value our lives more than anything else. Our behavior and decisions should be those that

will enable us to stay safe, productive, with a strong positive attitude but most of all, alive and therefore able to reach out and lift our communities up.

So to the youth, let us be united and live responsibly - know your HIV status - take a test and take control and care of our bodies. Let us speak with one voice because together we create a louder voice that will be heard everywhere. Let us get involved, be leaders in directing our own life, support one another - the positive and the HIV-free - in the fight against HIV/AIDS, stigma and discrimination and do all of this with total commitment.

Mr. President, my name is Rebecca Nerima and I am a young volunteer with the National Community of Women living With HIV/AIDS (NACWOLA). The message from the youth to our Government, parents and leaders is that we are ready.

Youth have already taken action but we need you to do your part by believing in us enough to support us and give us the space to get involved meaningfully in all programmes and efforts directed to reach us.

We urge you to lead us by example. Religious leaders, parents, politicians responsible for management of the resources for our communities - do not discriminate! Show that it is possible and in fact beneficial for all of us, when we all work together with respect for one another.

What we have learned very clearly in the past few days together is that youth are very vulnerable all over Africa, especially the girls, and yet, we continue to be excluded! In Africa, poverty and money are often the realities that drive people, young and old, to the choices that they make. This is costing us our lives.

To defeat HIV/AIDS, we need to have unity, security and income. There must be a strong commitment from all leaders in every capacity, to ensure that youth are protected from abuse, exploitation, exclusion and all social and cultural practices that continue to fuel their vulnerability to HIV/AIDS. These practices are many - our sisters have told us of forced and early marriages; where there is conflict and

insecurity, rape is the order of the day and this is true for too many youth in North and North-Eastern Uganda today; unsafe circumcision is also still practiced. None of these are acceptable today when we understand that these cost us lives.

We know that there are resources now to provide drugs for those that are living with HIV/AIDS and so help prolong their lives. We urge you all to make the treatment, care and support for all children and young people living with HIV/AIDS a priority. To your commitment to programmes on prevention, we demand that you add commitment to the care and support including treatment for the young - this is our right!

Mr. President, to you therefore and to all our leaders and parents here today, we ask you to take the message from the youth and also act with total commitment in supporting and involving youth. If what you are doing or planning is meant for youth - let us take a leading role and make sure you work deliberately to involve the girls.

We thank you for listening, please help us take these voices beyond this occasion. We are ready to do more, Mr. President, are you ready to stand by us?