

A SPECIAL REPORT

WorldAidsDay2007



# Help where it's needed most

In the late 1990s, Ireland made a decision to commit large parts of its African aid to the battle against HIV/Aids. Gráinne Faller looks at how the money is being spent

When the first World Aids Day was held on this day in 1988, the developed world was living in fear of a massive pandemic that, for the richer countries, never materialised. Massive education campaigns about prevention, as well as the discovery and availability of anti-retroviral drugs, meant that by the turn of the century, in these countries at least, the issue of HIV/Aids had all but fallen off the agenda.

By that time in the developing world, however, the true extent of the disease and its effects were coming to the fore. Nicola Brennan, a senior specialist on Aids and HIV in the Department of Foreign Affairs recalls: "Back then where we were working in sub-Saharan Africa - which is the most affected region in the world - life expectancy was decreasing and poverty was increasing so despite the work that we were doing we weren't making much progress. It was very obvious that HIV was a huge issue and not just

a medical one." It was at that point, in the late 1990s and the early part of the millennium, that Ireland took the decision to specifically focus large amounts of funding on HIV/Aids.

Minister for Foreign Affairs Dermot Ahern explains: "Unless the international community addresses the Aids pandemic we will never achieve the Millennium Development Goals of reducing poverty and vulnerability... HIV and Aids is the greatest obstacle to development we know."

The Irish commitment has been taken seriously and our current contribution of €100 million per annum to the fight against HIV/Aids is the highest proportion of a development budget contributed by any of the EU states. It is somewhat appropriate, therefore, that the international theme of World Aids Day this year is leadership. Minister of State for Overseas Development Michael Kitt is keen to point out Ireland's track record in this

respect. "The Taoiseach was the only European head of state to attend the UN General Assembly's special session on HIV and Aids in 2001." Ireland's commitment, he points out, has been established for some time.

The €100 million that Ireland currently spends is split to tackle all areas of HIV/Aids prevention, intervention, treatment, care and support. The money is spent at all levels, from global funding to organisations such as the UN and the Global Fund to Fight Aids, TB and Malaria. "There have been an estimated 1.8 million lives saved as a result of programmes funded by the Global Fund," says Brennan.

Ireland also provides money to governments so that they can deal with the disease on a country-wide level, and NGOs who deal with the crisis on a community level. Added to that, the fight against HIV/Aids is taking place at a policy level, with a number of governments proving very receptive to ideas that will boost their countries' chances against the disease. Ireland is also investing in research for a HIV vaccine as well as further methods of preventing infection, such as a microbicide, which could be used by women to prevent infection through intercourse.

The issues being tackled are many and varied. The effect of the disease on women and particularly children is being highlighted this year.

"One of the things that struck me during my visits to Darfur was the vulnerability of the women I met, not only to the on-going conflict, but also to the increased risk of HIV infection as a result of gender-based violence," says the Minister. Indeed, a girl is three times more likely to be infected with HIV/Aids in these countries than a boy of the same age. The availability of drugs will help but prevention is also key.

"Education, especially for girls, is a large element of the fight," says Michael Kitt. "The longer children are in school the less likely they are to contract HIV/Aids."

It is utterly impossible to mention more than a fraction of the issues currently being tackled through Irish funding. However, there are a number of elements being highlighted as part of World Aids Day in Ireland. "We have the Stamp Out Stigma campaign," Kitt says.

"Stigma surrounding HIV creates difficulties for people in Ireland and throughout the world. We were in Mozambique in September and I met a woman who had been abandoned by her husband. He thought she was possessed by evil spirits... She couldn't go home to her parents because she had to be near a hospital. A local NGO was helping her... The stigma and discrimination make life very difficult for people."



"Ireland is really trying to take a leadership role in terms of children and how they are affected by HIV/Aids which is being highlighted on World Aids Day as well," says Nicola Brennan.

"We deal with Unicef in relation to that issue," adds Michael Kitt. "Nine hundred children are infected with HIV on a daily basis and 15 million children have lost one or both parents to the disease. The Taoiseach announced an increase in Ireland's support to children affected in this way."

The prevention of transfer of the disease from mother to child is another area that needs to be highlighted, according to the Minister of State.

So with all of the funding and the work being done what improvements have taken place?

"There are pockets of progress," explains Brennan. "UN figures show that there has been a decrease in the number of people living with HIV. Last year they were estimated at 39.5 million and this year they are 33.2 million, which is a huge decrease."

Political commitment has improved substantially both here and overseas and the money available has also increased, according to Brennan, but the most significant progress has been made in the increase in access to HIV treatment.

"Nothing was available in these countries in the year 2000. Now, in sub-Saharan Africa, 30 per cent of people are now accessing treatment. Still not enough, but a definite improvement."

Clockwise from main: the Minister of State for Overseas Development Michael Kitt with nurses at the opening of the Massinga hospital in Mozambique, which received €1 million in Irish aid; Irario (75), reads a book with his eight-year-old granddaughter, Rossett Kansime, in the village of Rwegwe, in Uganda. Rossett, whose parents died of Aids, lives with her grandfather and attends a Unicef-assisted school; Mulu Melka, 13, holds up a medical certificate that indicates she is HIV-negative, in Dima Primary School in the Alem Gena district in Ethiopia; the Minister for Foreign Affairs Dermot Ahern meeting local women in Chad; Esnarro Kunika sits with her grandchildren in Mzuzu, Malawi. Esnarro provides for 10 of her grandchildren who were orphaned when their parents died of Aids.

Photographs: Unicef/Giacomo Pirozzi, Andrew Heavens; Maxwell Photography

For now, at least, Irish commitment is strong and according to the politicians it should remain that way in the foreseeable future. "Addressing the global pandemic will remain a key priority within our overseas development programme for some time to come," says the Minister for Foreign Affairs Dermot Ahern.

This special report was produced in association with the following organisations

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## Cautious optimism

Aids infection rates are dropping in Africa, but there are fears that rates in Asia are growing, Breda Gahan of Dochas tells Christine Bohan

It is rare to hear good news of any kind in the ongoing battle against HIV and Aids. However, a report published last week by UNAids noted that due to improvements in surveillance new data has revealed that "global HIV prevalence - the percentage of people living with HIV - has levelled off and that the number of new infections has fallen, in part as a result of the impact of HIV programmes."

It was welcome news, especially for people living in countries which have had their populations decimated by the virus. Of the approximately three million people who died of Aids in 2006, two million of them were in Africa.

"There are countries which are dealing with a tsunami of illness," says Breda Gahan of Concern, who chairs the Dóchas HIV and Aids

working group, which makes up a major part of Ireland's response to the fight against HIV overseas.

Dóchas, the Irish Association of Non-Governmental Development Organisations (NGOs), set up the working group as an umbrella body of 13 NGOs, including Concern, Oxfam Ireland, Trócaire and Christian Aid Ireland. It was established to share expertise and learning on HIV and Aids and to provide a representative voice for the Irish development NGOs.

Over the years, the member organisations of Dóchas have witnessed the impact of the HIV crisis on development processes across the globe. In response, they have implemented projects and programmes aimed at halting the spread of HIV and supporting people infected - and affected - by

the disease and its impacts.

Between them, the 13 organisations have put in place a total of 210 HIV and Aids-related projects and programmes, the vast majority of which were in sub-Saharan Africa in 2007. The total budget for the HIV and Aids work of the 13 NGOs in 2006 was €13.6m, 71 per cent of which was funded by the Irish Government through Irish Aid.

One of the most serious difficulties in tackling HIV in some developing countries has been the outright refusal of leaders to acknowledge the scale or even the existence of the virus. Earlier this year, South Africa's deputy minister for health was sacked, apparently because she made plans for an unauthorised trip to an Aids conference in Spain.

"In the early days especially there was a huge difficulty with leaders not acknowledging what was happening in their own countries," says Gahan. "It isn't until they hit what I call 'the Aids wave' - basically when the sufferers start to get ill and die - that they take notice. The HIV stage of the illness is more invisible, and because the countries can't see the direct effect, they can be very slow to act."



A truck drivers' association in Orissa, India that is being helped by Concern's HIV and Aids programme. Photograph: Lizzy Noone

Gahan is quick to point to the link between poverty and HIV. "If the 18 million-plus people who have died from HIV and Aids-related illnesses since 2000 had had access to life-saving drugs, many of them should now be living positively with HIV in 2007. Aids is a disease of poverty as extremely poor people are more susceptible to HIV."

As well as difficulties in providing affordable drugs, the health-care system itself has come under pressure. "Many doctors and nurses are leaving places like Africa to go and work in developed countries because the salaries in their own countries are so low," says Gahan. "So at the very time that people

need a strong health-care system, it's falling apart."

One of the challenges faced by development organisations in recent years has been that, aside from stories about new treatments or attempts to make generic treatment drugs available, the HIV/Aids epidemic is a difficult subject for the media to cover. "It's not news friendly," says Gahan. "It's not a tsunami, it's not a boat going down, you can't capture it in one image. I've been in homes where people are dying and I've never had a camera in any of these houses. It would be invasive, pornographic even. It's people dying alone, sometimes literally where they fall down."

In the same way, if you brought a camera to a funeral in Ireland you'd be shot, it's very difficult to document what's going on."

The report published last week by UNAids acknowledged that the number of people living with HIV worldwide is likely to have been overestimated in the past. As a result of changing methodologies, the agency estimated that there are 32.2 million people living with Aids, down from the 39.5 million it estimated last year.

"The methodology of measuring how many people have HIV is always going to be difficult," says Gahan. "Some would argue that the actual figure is still under-reported. There are some countries that either don't allow or don't have the capacity to do a house-to-house survey, so the figures would be based, for example, on sight surveillance based on people who turn up for services."

Despite the UNAids report, figures for eastern Europe and central Asia show massive increases. "Since 2001 the number of people living with HIV in eastern Europe and Central Asia has increased by more than 150 per cent, from 630,000 to 1.6 million in 2007," says Gahan. "My concern is that Asia could be sleeping through it and in a few years time we'll see a situation there that we're seeing in Africa now."