

HIV/AIDS in Africa

CANADA'S MORAL IMPERATIVE

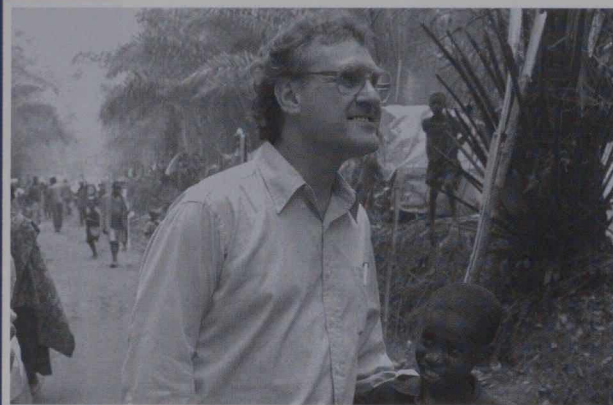


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Stephen Lewis's tireless work and eloquent entreaties as the UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy for HIV/AIDS in Africa have touched Canadians and the world. The former Canadian Ambassador to the United Nations, Deputy Executive Director of UNICEF and leader of the New Democratic Party of Ontario, Mr. Lewis at 66 has found perhaps the most passionate undertaking of his career: addressing the pandemic that has taken 15 million lives in Africa, with tens of millions more infected. In conversation with *Canada World View*, the recently invested Companion of the Order of Canada and Chair of the Board of Directors of the Stephen Lewis Foundation praised Canadian efforts in Africa—while exhorting his country to do more.

The struggle

I see this as part of the struggle against injustice. I'm a democratic socialist; this is part of a deeply believed ideological mindset. In a sense for me it's a very political thing. It just gives expression to what I have believed all my adult life. It happens to be applied to HIV/AIDS and that happens to be a particularly difficult struggle, and it's international rather than domestic, but it is for me an extension of an ideological conviction, of a political position. It's not some moral aura.

Love of Africa

My first contact with Africa was Ghana two years after independence [working as a young schoolteacher in 1959]. You can only imagine the excitement in the country about future prospects and overthrowing the yoke of colonialism and all that stuff. There's just something so exhilarating and invigorating. Now I wander through the rural areas of these countries where the decimation from disease and poverty is just horrific, and yet there's such a resilience, there's so much solidarity. People extend themselves so strongly to each other when they are asked to help. There's so much music, there's so much liveliness and life. I'm just totally captivated by the continent.

Why Canada has responded

It's part of the Canadian tradition on the one hand, and it's part of an absolute moral imperative on the other. There are all kinds of practical reasons, from security to

trade, that can be invoked. For myself it's enough to feel moral obligation, a kind of decent compassion for the struggles of other people who are light years away from the Canadian standard of living. If you don't deal with AIDS, then all of the UN Millennium Development Goals in Africa and all of the social and economic improvements you're throwing Canadian money behind are going to disintegrate in front of your eyes.

What Canada is doing

Canada, like other Western countries, is involved in fighting the pandemic in a great many ways. We are among the biggest contributors to the search for an AIDS vaccine in the developing world, which I think was an exemplary decision on the part of the government, because if anything is ever found it will probably be under the rubric of the International AIDS Vaccine Initiative. We support a number of NGOs and initiatives in many countries dealing with prevention and care, in ways that are not particularly different from what other governments do, but that are very helpful. I think that the most dramatic initiative will come if and when the legislation on the generic manufacture and export of drugs passes the House of Commons.

More is needed

I agree with the Parliamentary Standing Committee [on Foreign Affairs and International Trade] that unanimously felt that the contribution to the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria should be tripled. A second