

Nelson Mandela speech – International AIDS Conference, Durban, 2000

To have been asked to deliver the closing address at this conference, which in a very literal sense concerns itself with matters of life and death, weighs heavily upon me for the gravity of the responsibility placed on one.

No disrespect is intended towards the many other occasions where one has been privileged to speak, if I say that this is the one event where every word uttered, every gesture made, had to be measured against the effect it can and will have on the lives of millions of concrete, real human beings all over this continent and planet. This is not an academic conference. This is, as I understand it, a gathering of human beings concerned about turning around one of the greatest threats humankind has faced, and certainly the greatest after the end of the great wars of the previous century.

It is never my custom to use words lightly. If twenty-seven years in prison have done anything to us, it was to use the silence of solitude to make us understand how precious words are and how real speech is in its impact upon the way people live and die.

If by way of introduction I stress the importance of the way we speak, it is also because so much unnecessary attention around this conference had been directed towards a dispute that is unintentionally distracting from the real life and death issues we are confronted with as a country, a region, a continent and a world.

I do not know nearly enough about science and its methodologies or about the politics of science and scientific practice to even wish to start contributing to the debate that has been raging on the perimeters of this conference.

I am, however, old enough and have gone through sufficient conflicts and disputes in my life-time to know that in all disputes a point is arrived at where no party, no matter how right or wrong it might have been at the start of that dispute, will any longer be totally in the right or totally in the wrong. Such a point, I believe, has been reached in this debate.

The President of this country is a man of great intellect who takes scientific thinking very seriously and he leads a government that I know to be committed to those principles of science and reason.

The scientific community of this country, I also know, holds dearly to the principle of freedom of scientific enquiry, unencumbered by undue political interference in and direction of science.

Now, however, the ordinary people of the continent and the world - and particularly the poor who on our continent will again carry a disproportionate burden of this scourge - would, if anybody cared to ask their opinion, wish that the dispute about the primacy of politics or science be put on the backburner and that we proceed to address the needs and concerns of those suffering and dying. And this can only be done in partnership.

I come from a long tradition of collective leadership, consultative decision-making and joint action towards the common good. We have to overcome much that many thought insurmountable through an adherence to those practices. In the face of the grave threat posed by HIV/AIDS, we have to rise above our differences and combine our efforts to save our people. History will judge us harshly if we fail to do so now, and right now.

Let us not equivocate: a tragedy of unprecedented proportions is unfolding in Africa. AIDS today in Africa is claiming more lives than the sum total of all wars, famines and floods, and the ravages of such deadly diseases as malaria. It is devastating families and communities, overwhelming and depleting health care services; and robbing schools of both students and teachers.

Business has suffered, or will suffer, losses of personnel, productivity and profits; economic growth is being undermined and scarce development resources have to be diverted to deal with the consequences of the pandemic.

HIV/AIDS is having a devastating impact on families, communities, societies and economies. Decades have been chopped from life expectancy and young child mortality is expected to more than double in the most severely affected countries of Africa. AIDS is clearly a disaster, effectively wiping out the development gains of the past decades and sabotaging the future.

Earlier this week we were shocked to learn that within South Africa 1 in 2, that is half, of our young people will die of AIDS. The most frightening thing is that all of these infections, which statistics tell us about, and the attendant human suffering, could have been, can be, prevented.

Something must be done as a matter of the greatest urgency. And with nearly two decades of dealing with the epidemic, we now do have some experience of what works.

The experience in a number of countries has taught that HIV infection can be prevented through investing in information and life skills development for young people. Promoting abstinence, safe sex and the use of condoms and ensuring the early treatment of sexually transmitted diseases are some of the steps needed and about which there can be no dispute. Ensuring that people, especially the young, have access to voluntary and confidential HIV counselling and testing services and introducing measures to reduce mother-to-child transmission have been proven to be essential in the fight against AIDS. We have recognised the importance of addressing the stigmatisation and discrimination, and of providing safe and supportive environments for people affected by HIV/AIDS.

The experiences of Uganda, Senegal and Thailand have shown that serious investments in and mobilisation around these actions make a real difference. Stigma and discrimination can be stopped; new infections can be prevented; and the capacity of families and communities to care for people living with HIV and AIDS can be enhanced.

It is not, I must add, as if the South African government has not moved significantly on many of these areas. It was the first deputy president in my government that oversaw and drove the initiatives in this regard, and as President continues to place this issue on top of the national and continental agenda. He will with me be the first to concede that much more remains to be done. I do not doubt for one moment that he will proceed to tackle this task with the resolve and dedication he is known for.

The challenge is to move from rhetoric to action, and action at an unprecedented intensity and scale. There is a need for us to focus on what we know works.

We need to break the silence, banish stigma and discrimination, and ensure total inclusiveness within the struggle against AIDS; those who are infected with this terrible disease do not want stigma, they want love.

We need bold initiatives to prevent new infections among young people, and large-scale actions to prevent mother-to-child transmission, and at the same time we need to continue the international effort of searching for appropriate vaccines; and we need to aggressively treat opportunistic infection; and we

need to work with families and communities to care for children and young people to protect them from violence and abuse, and to ensure that they grow up in a safe and supportive environment.

For this there is need for us to be focused, to be strategic, and to mobilise all of our resources and alliances, and to sustain the effort until this war is won. About two years ago I invited one of the stars who opened this conference, Nkosi Johnson and as I spoke to him, I asked him a question: "what do you want to be when you are old?" and he said "well, I don't know." And I said "well you have enough time to consider that question", and I said "don't you want to be a president?" and he said "it looks like hard work." But the point is that all of us have a duty to give support and love to all those who, on many occasions, have become HIV positive not because of any bad behaviour on their part, especially children.

I invited to my house a young fellow who is sixteen but he is about this size, and he asked me a question I dreaded because in the course of the conversation with other children, some suffering from cancer, other from HIV, others from tuberculosis and he said to me: what do you think of men like myself. It was very difficult to answer because he suffers from a type of cancer which affects the bone, which has made his bones brittle and every time somebody touches him roughly there is a breakage somewhere in his body and he asked me this question: "what do you think of people like myself? The difficulty was that I did not want to give him a false hope, at the same time I could not refrain from answering the question, I then said to him "the important thing is that you are alive, you have the security of having two parents who love you, you are a very bright, intelligent youngster, don't think you will leave your family, your beloveds, your people, your country under a cloud of shame. You must be determined that you will disappear under a cloud of glory and I quoted to him a verse which I often repeat, especially when I am faced with the situation of having to say good bye to somebody "cowards die many times before their death, the valiant never taste of death but once, of all the wonders I yet have seen it seems most strange that men should fear seeing that death, a necessary act will death when it will come" that was Shakespeare and everyone who listens to those words disappears under a cloud of glory, becomes a worthy candidate for immortality. We want to move away from rhetoric to practical action and as I said earlier this morning we want men and women who can penetrate the exterior and appreciate the beauty inside every human being.

We need, and there is increasing evidence of, African resolve to fight this war. Others will not save us if we do not primarily commit ourselves. Let us,

however, not underestimate the resources required to conduct this battle. Partnership with the international community is vital. A constant theme in all our messages has been that in this inter-dependent and globalised world, we have indeed again become the keepers of our brother and sister. That cannot be more graphically the case than in the common fight against HIV/AIDS.

As one small contribution to the great combined effort that is required, I have instructed my Foundation to explore in consultation with others the best way in which we can be involved in the battle against this terrible scourge ravaging our continent and world. It is, I think, not something that can be achieved by a single individual. No matter how important, how influential, it is essentially a package in each country between governments, because no government anywhere in the world has sufficient resources on its own to be able to fight and win this battle. Therefore, there must be a partnership between business and the community without that this battle will not be won and also to use the skills, the experience, the research that have been conducted all over the world in order to enlighten our people as how to approach this tragedy.

With these words, I thank all of you most sincerely for your involvement in that struggle. Let us combine our efforts to ensure a future for our children. The challenge is no less.

I have been asked on countless occasions, which of the heads of states of the world has impressed me most. Well I have to be careful because that answer to that question could lead to a diplomatic row any many countries I do not mention could withdraw their ambassadors from South Africa but I often say that my heroes are not necessarily men and women who have titles, it is the humble men and women that you find in all communities but who have chosen the world as the theatre of their operations, who feel the greatest challenges are the socio-economic issues that face the world like poverty, illiteracy, disease, lack of housing, inability to send your children to school - those are my heroes. If any head of state qualifies in this, he is my hero.

I thank you.