

Business and AIDS in South Africa

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We are 25 years into the AIDS epidemic, and despite extraordinary efforts to control the spread of HIV/AIDS, the epidemic continues. Governments are devoting ever more resources to overcome the disease; Non-governmental organizations are battling it in every arena; and international organizations of all types are experimenting with a host of prevention strategies, treatment and care models. The level of funding available for this work has skyrocketed, resulting in many improved and saved lives, and a more advanced understanding of the virus, including its spread and its social and economic impact. Despite these advances we are still besieged. In this situation, we must not leave any stone unturned as we seek new pathways for battling this disease. Business action to combat AIDS raises complex questions. This issue of *AIDS* explores many of the considerations that arise when business gets involved in an arena that usually lies well beyond its dominant concerns. Business, after all, is first and foremost a profit-oriented venture. The most common impetus for business decisions is the narrow definition of the bottom line: making money for the shareholders, be they public or private. Is this basic business drive compatible with a socially driven endeavor such as responding to the AIDS epidemic? The answer may well be yes. Business needs a thriving economy, and it needs healthy workers. It also increasingly sees the commercial value that derives from corporate social responsibility – and some corporations may see such responsibility as a valid motivation in itself. There is little doubt that business has resources and skills, which allow it to make a difference in social endeavors. But how far can

this go? Can the potential conflict between seeking profit and doing social good be overcome?

We need to air these questions in a very public way, and the coeditors are pleased that *AIDS* is devoting this supplement to this topic. The articles gathered here focus on South Africa – a country that suffers greatly from AIDS and that has already seen business involved in AIDS action. These articles make an effort to bring certain pressing questions into the open, by presenting a set of experiences that bear on this important issue. How much of a difference has business made? Can much more be done? Can business champion the battle against AIDS? Or are there still obstacles, or perceptions of obstacles, stemming from past hesitancy or past practices that need to be overcome? Large businesses have been disproportionately involved thus far. Their workers, and in some cases nearby communities, have benefited. Should small- and medium-sized enterprises be more actively involved in the control of HIV/AIDS and if so, how should that be achieved? Will business as a whole be able to reach beyond its workforce and the nearby communities, and especially to those who are socially and economically the most vulnerable to HIV/AIDS such as women, children, and the poor?

We must not shy away from the difficult questions that arise when business becomes involved in social concerns. And we cannot paper over uneasiness about alliances that may seem odd or even shocking. We face a common disaster, and if business can be an ally, let us welcome it.

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