

**AIDS 2012: AN OPPORTUNITY FOR INTERNATIONAL ADVOCACY BY DR. M. I. OSEJI,
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The 19th International AIDS Conference (AIDS 2012) to me was a unique opportunity for international advocacy on a number of issues being addressed by Public Health Impact Research Centre at local, national and international level. For starters it was the first time I was able to make it to pre-conference events such as the Interfaith Pre-conference on HIV, and the Children and HIV symposium. Secondly, this was the conference in which I saw the greatest number of famous people namely:

President Bill Clinton: former President of the United States
Hillary Clinton: Secretary of State and former First Lady, United States
Laura Bush: former First Lady, United States
Kenneth Kaunda: former President of Zambia
Jim Yong Kim: President of the World Bank Group
Barbara Lee: member of Congress, US House of Representatives, 9th District, California
Yvonne Chaka Chaka: South African Singer
Vincent Gray: Mayor of Washington D. C.
Michel Sidibe: Executive Director of UNAIDS
Nancy Pelosi: Minority Leader in the US House of Representatives
John Kerry: Senator and former Presidential Candidate, United States
Kathleen Sebelius, Secretary of Health and Human Services, United States

Thirdly, there were several affiliated events that allowed networking and learning such as the reception by London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine at the British Embassy in Washington D. C. on Monday 23rd July 2012, and the Continuing Medical Education Programme on Managing HIV in Special Populations organized by Med Learning Group at Grand Hyatt Hotel in Washington D. C. on 26th July 2012.

The theme of AIDS conference was “Turning the Tide Together” with a view to ending AIDS transmission.

On the morning of Monday 23rd July 2012, Hillary Clinton said five words that the people of the US had not been able to say for too long “Welcome to the United States”. She noted that through the organisation of International AIDS Conferences, caring has brought action and action has made impact. According to Clinton, attempts to shift the popular AIDS programme, PEPFAR, out of emergency mode has necessitated making difficult conversations such as government corruption, procurement and delivery of drugs but has brought closer collaboration with the Global Fund. Hillary Clinton explained that an AIDS-free generation meant that:

- i. Virtually no child anywhere will be born with the virus
- ii. As children and teenagers become adults, they will be at significantly lower risk of ever becoming infected than they would be today, no matter where they are living
- iii. If someone does acquire HIV, they will have access to treatment that helps prevent them from developing AIDS and passing the virus onto others

She stated that “HIV may be with us”, “but the diseases that HIV causes need not be with us”. Hillary Clinton also explained that in July 2010, President Obama launched the first comprehensive National HIV/AIDS Strategy which has invigorated the domestic response to the HIV epidemic especially in Washington DC. She expressed the renewed commitment of the United States in ensuring that 6 million people globally will be reached with life saving treatment. She further announced that 80 million US dollars will be used to support innovative approaches for HIV women to get the treatment they need wherever they were. According to Hillary, “Humans might discriminate but viruses do not.” The concept of combination prevention was described by Clinton as involving condoms, counselling and testing in addition to using treatment as prevention, voluntary medical male circumcision and stopping maternal to child transmission. Clinton also declared that every woman should be able to decide when to have children or not, and highlighted success stories from Haiti and Zambia.

Later that day, John Kerry passionately advocated for treatment as prevention, and male circumcision. He felt there was need for sustained commitment. He quoted a Lancet study that estimated the cost of making an impact in reducing new infections and mortality as 24 billion US dollars annually. He indicated that sound policies are also needed in addition to adequate funding. He criticized the US ban on homosexuals donating the blood and referred to various forms of “AIDS transition” such as when treatment begins to overtake new infections; where in-country leadership overtakes the direction of Washington; and how working together produces better returns for every dollar invested in AIDS programmes.

On Tuesday 23rd July 2012, I participated in the rally to advocate for big pharmaceutical companies to relax legislation for generic drugs to be manufactured. We rang bells from Action/Global Health Advocacy Partnership which had messages on them such as: “Tuberculosis kills one in four people with HIV”. We displayed placards with the message: “We will end AIDS when we put human lives above private profit”.

On Wednesday, 24th July 2012, I distributed leaflets produced by the Christian Women’s Fellowship International (CWF) of Church of God Mission, Asaba Zone I, titled “the Church and Health” in the Global Village as a way of sensitizing people on HIV prevention and other health matters.

During the Wednesday plenary session, Chewe Luo of UNICEF gave a remarkable presentation on “Turning the Tide for Children and Youth”. She focused her discussion on:

- i. Elimination of Maternal to Child Transmission of HIV
- ii. Early Infant Diagnosis and treatment of infected children
- iii. Targeting the second decade of life: Adolescent Prevention and Treatment

Luo highlighted the HIV transmission time points at which interventions for prevention needed to be targeted namely: pregnancy, labour, delivery and post-partum (during breastfeeding), while noting that not all infants born to HIV infected mothers will acquire HIV infection. Chewe Lou also stated that statistics in 2010 revealed that Nigeria contributes 29% of new infections in children and makes up 20% HIV related maternal mortality.

The National AIDS Control Agency (NACA), Nigeria had an exhibition booth where several resources were made available to guide the AIDS response in Nigeria. We were disappointed that unlike AIDS 2008 and 2010, there was no reception organized for Nigerian delegates by the Ambassador of Nigeria to the United States.

In a special film festival session, Yvonne Chaka Chaka, Singer from South Africa, advocated for the protection of married women from being infected by their husbands.

In a presentation on Thursday 25th July 2012, former first Lady, Laura Bush revealed how her mother-in-law, Barbara Bush promoted care and compassion rather than fear and judgment for people living with HIV/AIDS.

Friday 26th July 2012 saw the closing ceremony which featured a Keynote Address by President Bill Clinton. He spoke from the perspective of the Founder of the Clinton HIV/AIDS Initiative that has been operating in this arena for 10 years. He acknowledged UNITAID’s efforts in scaling up the number of people on HIV treatment.

Some important take homes from my experience at AIDS 2012 are as follows:

- We can end AIDS
- Investments must be made in local manufacture of generic drugs for Anti-Retroviral Therapy and Prevention of Maternal to Child Transmission of HIV, taking a cue from India.
- With accurate routine services, we can determine which interventions are actually working and scale them up.
- Nigeria is not being supported for community systems strengthening by Global Fund despite our huge burden of HIV

- Understanding Global Fund's Impact in countries requires accessing the Global Fund Database
- There is a universal clarion call to demonstrate greater efficiency in spending of funds.
- African governments are being called upon to step up actions to demonstrate responsibility and accountability.
- Anti-retroviral treatment should be initiated in all HIV infected pregnant women regardless of their CD4 count.
- Prevention as treatment: all HIV positive persons should be placed on treatment to reduce rates of transmission.
- Partnerships with film industries such as Nollywood should be encouraged to reach a wider audience with HIV/AIDS messages.
- Many thanks to President George Bush (JR), PEPFAR, and the American people for saving the lives of millions of AIDS victims including Nigerians.
- Continuous Professional Education is a great opportunity to scale up training and capacity building among health professionals.
- We need to scale up Greater Involvement of People with AIDS (GIPA) in Nigeria as is done by the international community.
- Faith-based organisations should borrow a leaf from Catholic organisations such as the Catholic Relief Services in promoting abstinence and mutual fidelity as means of preventing HIV infection.
- Studying abroad offers several opportunities for partnership with renowned health and research institutions to contribute to capacity building and systems strengthening.
- There is need to un-complicate the process of HIV service delivery for greater efficiency especially in developing countries.
- We need to take care of our caregivers so that they can be healthy and strong to keep caring.

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