



Meg French
Keynote Address
SLF 20th Anniversary Celebration
October 27, 2023
Winnipeg, MB

Hello and welcome. Thank you so much for joining us here tonight. I know that Stephen wishes he could have been here to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the Stephen Lewis Foundation. I will pass on the warm wishes I have heard from so many of you.

Twenty years ago, when Stephen was the UN Special Envoy for HIV and AIDS in Africa, he was travelling and meeting not only with politicians and government staff, but also going into communities where he was seeing the real devastation occurring across the continent. He was appalled that the international community was so lethargic in their response to the pandemic, and at the same time, he was inspired by the work happening in communities. Even in the face of deep stigma and discrimination, they were providing end-of-life support for people dying of AIDS-related illnesses, caring for children who had lost parents to the disease, and ensuring those affected by HIV, including older women, had a roof over their head and food to eat.

It was clear to Stephen that if we were to see an end to the AIDS pandemic, communities and community-led organizations were central to that solution. He saw they had the knowledge and the expertise, what they were missing were the funds. And that's where the SLF came in. We have spent the last twenty years partnering with community-led organizations who are championing health and human rights in communities that continue to be affected by the HIV epidemic.

And today we celebrate all that has been accomplished! Not just by the SLF, but more importantly we celebrate the progress that has occurred over the last twenty years in the fight against AIDS. In a world where we seem to move more and more quickly, and are barraged by ever changing platforms of information, twenty years of work can seem like ages, and progress can be hard to recognize - but let's look at the changes that have occurred.

In sub-Saharan Africa in 2003, which was the height of the pandemic, 3.2 million people newly acquired HIV that year. Twenty years later that number has fallen by 80% to an annual number of 660,000. In 2003, 2.3 million people in the region died of AIDS-related illnesses. I remember being in Malawi in 2004 and driving down the street and seeing the booming business of coffin making – a striking connection to what was driving the rise of child headed households and children being raised by their grandmothers. Since that time, the number of deaths has fallen by 83%, and over the past year, there have been 380,000 deaths. This decrease in deaths is largely due to the increase in access to anti-retroviral treatment. More and more people are on ARVs and are virally

suppressed, meaning they cannot pass on the virus. While today, over 80% of people living with HIV are on treatment, the UNAIDS report in 2003 didn't even contain figures for how many people were on treatment at that time because it was so rare.

We can see the twenty years of progress in this data.

But these are numbers, and as we all know, behind the numbers, behind this progress, are real people – children who might have lost their parents 20 years ago are living with them today. Young women who might have acquired the disease previously are living free from HIV. Children who might have died before reaching their second birthday, are now born to mothers on ARVs who, because of viral suppression, will not pass on the virus to their babies. This progress means more children in school, more families with the funds needed to ensure everyone is fed, more birthday celebrations, more laughter and more hugs!

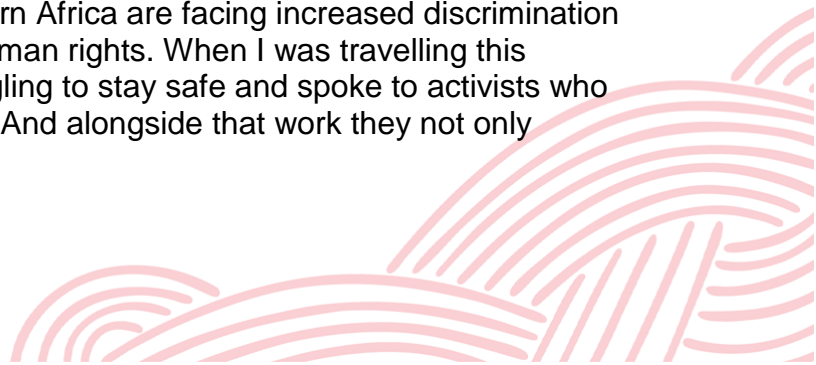
Progress is being made and there is hope for more progress! Graca Machel, an Elder and a wonderful woman who has been an advisor to the SLF once said, “Hope is the most precious commodity that humanity possesses.” She is so right and it is a commodity that requires action. And so, while we celebrate the progress that has been made, we must continue our work to end AIDS.

While we have more and more medicines and tests to prevent and treat HIV, what continues to drive the HIV epidemic is inequities. Inequities driven by racism, colonialism, gender inequality, homophobia and transphobia. Realizing the human rights of all is the ultimate key to ending AIDS.

When we dig into the numbers that I mentioned earlier, we see that the progress of the last 20 years has not been equal. Teenage girls and young women, men who have sex with men, trans people, and sex workers are all more likely to be living with HIV because of the discrimination they face. This is what community-led organizations are working diligently to address.

This summer I visited with one of our partners, LVCT in Nairobi, Kenya. LVCT has set up a website and a hotline for adolescents to get access to information about sexual and reproductive health. Young people are involved in developing the materials to ensure that that the content speaks the language of their peers and answers any questions they might have. The councillors involved are able to provide recommendations on youth-friendly health services for young people to get tested and treatment for HIV. The program is so well done that not only are young people in Kenya accessing the information, but so are young people from across the continent. The program recognizes the need to support the agency of adolescents over their own health, particularly adolescent girls.

Our LGBTIQ partners in eastern and southern Africa are facing increased discrimination and stigma and are fighting hard for their human rights. When I was travelling this summer, I spoke with people who are struggling to stay safe and spoke to activists who are committed to countering the rising hate. And alongside that work they not only



provide health services to their communities, including mental health support, but they are also working to address homophobia, biphobia and transphobia by training mainstream health workers and police forces on the rights and health needs of their communities.

We also saw, during the worst of the COVID-19 pandemic, an increase in teenage pregnancies and gender based violence. SLF partners worked hard to ensure that girls returned when schools reopened, as we know how important education is to reducing both early marriage and teenage pregnancies. Partners also continue to do outreach and provide shelter for survivors of violence. They work with communities, including men, recognizing that the culture of violence against women requires change from the perpetrators of that violence not just support to survivors.

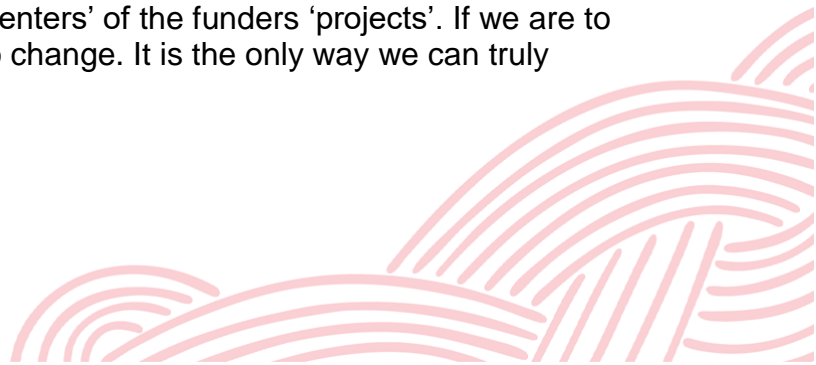
And this past week, supported by SLF partners, grandmothers gathered across ten countries in sub-Saharan Africa to develop national advocacy strategies and to meet with decision makers to ensure that older women and the children in their care are protected and supported by strong policies and services that recognize their particular needs and rights. The grannies reminded those in power “Nothing about us without us!”

The HIV epidemic does not solely require a medical response. It is so much more and the community-led organizations that the SLF partners with have known this for decades and have always approached their work with a holistic view to the needs of their communities and the realization of their rights.

While we at the Foundation prioritize funding this work, we recognize that our response needs to be holistic as well. As a foundation that is grounded in feminism and in an anti-colonial approach to partnership, we have learned a lot over the last 20 years and it is our responsibility to share those learnings with the international development and philanthropic communities. We cannot possibly fund all the work of our partners, but we can help advocate for changes that will increase not only the quantity of funding, but the quality of that funding.

We advocate to the federal government and to other foundations and funders to make changes to their funding practices. What we have heard time and again from our partners is that our long term partnerships, which for many have been going on for 10, 15, 20 years, have provided them with the security they need to grow and adapt their programs and to weather tough times. The flexibility of our funding and the freedom they have to spend those funds on staffing, rent, electricity, or whatever they identify as priorities, has allowed them to fill the budgetary gaps that are left by other donors who insist that their funding not go to such costs.

The SLF funding model is one that aims to address the colonial roots of international development that sees funders in the global north holding the power and sees community-led organizations as the ‘implementers’ of the funders ‘projects’. If we are to achieve human rights for all, then this has to change. It is the only way we can truly accelerate progress.



I am an optimist and I do have hope that we will one day live in a world where human rights violations are the exception, not the norm for so many, and where AIDS is a thing of the past. To get there we need to build a larger and larger community of people across the globe who act in solidarity with one another. All of us here in this room are part of that community. Your support for and partnership with the Stephen Lewis Foundation allows us to continue the work that Stephen envisioned twenty years ago and I deeply thank you for that. We are inspired by your support and will continue, for as long as it takes, working with community-led organizations in sub-Saharan Africa to address the inequities that are driving the HIV epidemic. Together we will achieve human rights for all and an end to AIDS. Thank you.

