

Business's pallid response to AIDS

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It was a revealing moment. Stephen Lewis, the United Nation's ubiquitous special envoy for HIV/AIDS in Africa, had held in thrall a crowd of more than 500 Ashbury College students, alumni and benefactors on Thursday evening. He had spoken extemporaneously for 40 minutes, his voice undulating with anger, bewilderment, despair and a soupcon of hope.

His message was blunt: The response of Western nations to Africa's AIDS crisis was pallid beyond redemption, and business wasn't doing any better.

"One of the things that's missing," he told the gathering, "is a significant contribution from the private sector."

Lewis even offered a target for corporations. Why not donate 0.7 per cent of post-tax profits to the Global Fund, the independent group that is disbursing billions of dollars to fight AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria on behalf of national governments, aid groups and businesses from around the world?

Lewis acknowledged to the students that he had advocated a far more demanding target in his just-published book, *Race Against Time*. There, he promoted the idea of giving 0.7 per cent of pre-tax profits, which for most companies would involve a hugely higher total.

"Those much better acquainted with business than I have convinced me to revise that to post profits," Lewis said, amid much laughter.

This is the remarkable thing about Lewis -- his ability simultaneously to inform, inspire and entertain. Despite his evident antipathy towards business, he is able to joke about his occasionally ham-fisted attempts to mold its behaviour. Equally notable is Lewis's resiliency in the face of repeated trips to African countries that are losing huge chunks of their young adult population to disease.

Lewis understands very well that a corporate target of 0.7 per cent of profits -- whether pre or post -- will almost certainly not be met, especially when Canada is nowhere near meeting its own pledge to spend 0.7 per cent of its national income on overseas aid.

The private sector's small stake in the Global Fund tells the tale. Since 2001, the fund has secured a total of \$8.7 billion U.S. in commitments to 2008, enough to support more than 150 aid programs in more than 90 countries. As of last December, nearly 400,000 HIV/AIDS victims have been started on antiretroviral treatments paid for by the fund.

But less than two per cent of the fund's pledges have come from the private sector -- much of that from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the vehicle established by the founder of software giant Microsoft.

A study prepared late last year for the Global Fund noted that most of the slim corporate donations came from just a handful of firms, including ENI, an Italian energy conglomerate and Winterthur, a Swiss insurance company. The study suggested part of the problem is structural: It's much easier to raise significant amounts of money from a few dozen governments than through thousands of individual firms.

In part, this is what prompted the formation of the Global Business Coalition on HIV/AIDS, the New York-based organization that bills itself as the "leading the business fight against HIV/AIDS." The coalition has taken on the job of boosting business contributions to the Global Fund.

The coalition has more than 200 members, but only three are Canadian. These include Alcan, Placer Dome and MedMira (the Halifax-based maker of blood test kits). To put this in context, there are three times as many coalition members from India.

Of course, India's larger corporations have a long tradition of giving corporate aid -- not surprising, given their constant exposure to immense poverty. Even so, it's worth pondering why India's economy, just now exiting from developing world status, can muster more champions than Canada. All the more so when you consider that India's pharmaceutical companies -- Cipla, Ranbaxy and Strides Acrolab -- recently agreed to supply anti-AIDS drugs to African states at 30 per cent below market prices.

It's true India has a direct stake in this fight. But, compared to Africa, India is afflicted with mere pockets of HIV and AIDS infections. In Lesotho, the tiny country embedded within South Africa, the HIV infection rate for those between 15 and 49 is approaching 30 per cent.

Lesotho has embarked on an unprecedented campaign to test every person in the country for disease. In Lewis' view, the country has the "best political leadership on the continent," but even that may not be enough to secure a win against AIDS because so many of Lesotho's normally productive young adults are dead or dying. What's needed is assistance at so many levels, from corporate donations to patient, hands-on help on the ground.

Peg Herbert, a former University of Ottawa lecturer, understands the imperative very well. She visited Lesotho two years ago and came away transformed by a sense of mission.

Herbert established the HelpLesotho charity (www.helplesotho.ca), which provides support to more than 6,000 children, many of them orphaned by AIDS. The website allows individuals from anywhere to make contributions as small as \$20 (for a sweater) to more than \$5,000 -- which would feed an entire school grade (75 to 120 children) for a year.

A key part of Herbert's charity involves teaching the children leadership skills that will allow them to assert their rights, including the ability to say no to sex or to insist that condoms be used. A deeper, more troubling problem is how to deal with so many orphans, whose emotional scars will surely manifest as they grow older.

For Lewis, this is everybody's fight. Government, business, individuals. But, except for frontline missionaries such as Lewis, Herbert and their cohorts, few have really distinguished themselves.

This is the message Lewis took to Ashbury this week. One senses his spirit is flagging somewhat. Where better to hunt for future flagbearers?

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