



HIV/AIDS in Africa: What Works?

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Transcript of Closing Remarks by

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The following remarks are my reactions to what has been a splendid day and a terrific learning experience for me. These are the reactions of a person who doesn't know half of what most of you know about these issues that we've been discussing; instead, they're reactions from a developing economist.

My first comment is to share a conclusion that was implicitly implied during this conference; that as a community of development activists, we need to make it much clearer to the American people and the Congress that Africa is a place where there is good government. This is only obvious to the people who have been there and who have worked on some of these programs there. While there are, of course, problems, the region has many countries with incredible leadership. As I have heard today, it is also a region with many programs that are working. Since most people outside of this room are not aware of this, it is critical to create and to sustain that message of success. I hope that when President Bush does go to Africa, he has the opportunity to interact at a high professional level with all of the competent committed people in the region working on these issues.

The second conclusion I would like to make is that there is a kind of irony in the fact that the war against HIV/AIDS is transforming public health systems around the developing world. It is bringing bold, new solutions. Moreover, it is transforming societies. In Brazil, for example, there is a transformation in the way that people think about health, and in the way that they think about both what the government owes them and what their government is accountable for. And, of course, it is transforming societies in terms of the way that societies think about the issues that Geeta Rao Gupta raised of discrimination, of stigma, and of the role of women in society. And that is what development is about. So there is a kind of sad paradox around the fact that we had to have this pandemic to begin and reinforce a process of transformation in developing countries and in the developed world.

Third, it is transforming the way that the development assistance business works. I've spent 20 years working in the development business, a field in which many of you work as well. It is extraordinary to hear a Congressman repeat the idea stated so brilliantly earlier in the day, that we are fighting a war that is someone else's backyard. Due in part to this war on the AIDS pandemic, we are finally seeing real internalization in the development business community of the need for community-based programs that involve ownership. I believe that USAID has not received sufficient credit for working with NGOs in

developing countries at the community level for more than twenty years. This has not been true at the World Bank, however, and I don't know if has been true at the African Development Bank. So ironically, what a high price we have had to pay as a global community. Many of you can take some credit for helping transform the way the development assistance business works.

It is clear that we know better now than we did ten years ago how to spend money in this war against the HIV/AIDS pandemic. From the perspective of a development economist, I have witnessed that the cost of dealing with this pandemic are very large relative to what developing countries historically, especially those in Africa, were spending on health care. It has taken time for that problem to be insinuated into people's minds. The irony in this is that there should be an effort to reduce cost, to be cost effective and to spend well. I believe we are at a juncture where we have to begin to think of the problem in a different framework; that it's about risks and returns. And what we heard today is that the risks of wasting money are falling because we understand better how to spend money well. The risks have not disappeared and they never will. But we also heard that the returns to spending money are huge. There has been much more emphasis recently on successes, and thus on the idea that the risks of wasting money are declining.

We need another meeting. Some of you need to think about more discussion of the huge returns that I've just expressed in an odd way. Returns to the transformation of the development assistance business, tremendous returns in spending money in this war, on this pandemic. We need to introduce the idea of reasonable risk to the American public, to the Congress, to other countries, to all of the NGOs and all of the community activists in this country who are concerned with related issues and are not yet familiar with the AIDS problem in Africa. The American public understands the idea of reasonable risk, which says that you need sometimes to invest money in order to find out what doesn't work. You sometimes need to put a lot of money into an issue to attract the best and the brightest people who in a second round, in a second iteration will be in a constant process of discovering how to spend money better.

At times, reasonable risk ex-post might look like waste. That's true of the way that we spend money in the military, on helicopters, on missile defense systems. It's true of the way we spend money in our public school systems in the U.S. And it can be true in an area where we are addressing a problem where the return is gigantic, not only in all the ways that I have mentioned in this policy talk but the return is in reducing misery and death around the world.

I hope today will mark the beginning of a new round of the right kind of information, the right kind of education, the right kind of research, the right kind of benign pressure on the Congress and this country, on the administration, on the many other people who are involved in spending money on development issues. It's not only a place for U.S.; it's the European Union. It's the money that goes through the IMF and the World Bank and the other multilateral development banks. It's the tremendous amount of money that is spent by private citizens in this country that go to international programs. I think that all of us can make a contribution to making some difference in all of those areas. And I must thank all of the contributors, panelists, Jim Kim, distinguished speakers, and, of course, all of you. Thank you very much.