

Will Trump derail HIV/AIDS fight?

HIV donor funding has made the difference in tackling the HIV crisis, saving lives, and pushing the world closer to an HIV-free future. In 2015 world leaders pledged to end AIDS by 2030 with the goals of zero new HIV infections, zero AIDS-related deaths, and zero stigma and discrimination.

Until weeks ago, Lesotho was on its way to achieving these goals. However, like a punch to the gut, the new US administration under President Trump ushered in orders with sweeping and destructive potential for our HIV programs.

Back in the day, getting HIV, the cause of AIDS, pretty much meant a death sentence. Nowadays, people worry most about the stigma. Sometimes we forget how lucky we are.

At the turn of the century, AIDS-related deaths were sky-high, especially in southern and eastern Africa. Poverty worsened, as families drained their savings on medical bills, leading to a loss of assets. In a struggling country like Lesotho, getting HIV was basically a ticket to becoming an ancestor. No joke!

Then came 2003, when the hardest hit nations got a lifeline, thanks to former U.S. President George W. Bush, who launched PEPFAR (President's Emergency Plan for

AIDS Relief), the first major global funding initiative for HIV. This unprecedented health program has poured significant funding into

National Agenda



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HIV prevention, care, and treatment and health systems strengthening in developing nations. Since 2006, the U.S. government, through PEPFAR, has committed more than \$630 million to the HIV response in Lesotho.

PEPFAR is the biggest commitment from any country to tackle a single disease, saving over 24 million lives globally and cutting new infections by more than half. Around the same time as PEPFAR, the Global Fund was set up to gather resources from governments, philanthropy, and the private



sector to support programs in countries hit hardest by HIV, malaria and tuberculosis and more recently COVID-19 and Mpox. The U.S. is historically also the biggest donor to the Global Fund. Both PEPFAR and the Global Fund were created to meet the urgent need for a united global response to major infectious diseases, especially HIV/AIDS.

Now, with Trump back in office, everyone involved in HIV is on edge, and I bet there are more prayers being sent up than ever. His "America First" approach of hyper-nationalism and disregard of global affairs has set off alarms across the planet. Hours after taking office on January 20, Trump ordered a 90-day pause on all foreign development aid, including life-saving programs like PEPFAR.

A few days later, on Jan 24, "stop work" orders were issued - meaning that patients would not get treatment and doctors, nurses,

lab technicians and all others funded by PEPFAR and other US donor programs, would not get paid.

An ensuing uprising from public health advocates around the world successfully pressured the new Trump administration to lift the freeze on the distribution of life-saving ARVs, less than a week later on January 29.

To say the least, this is a great relief but we don't know what it means for the sustainability of our comprehensive HIV programs and greater health systems buttressed by years of PEPFAR support.

What impacts would a worst-case scenario—the total withdrawal of US funding—have on the end of AIDS? Let's hope that God can change the new direction in Washington. But if our prayers go unanswered, what's next? Should we transition to activism and self-sufficiency? **More on this next week.**