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AIDS Activists Still Seeking Grassroots Change

By Zack Gross

This month's Sixteenth International AIDS Conference, held in Toronto, was titled "Time to Deliver". The question posed to Justa Mwaituka, conference participant and Director of a women's health organization in Tanzania, after the event was: Did the Conference deliver anything to its delegates and the fight against the HIV/AIDS scourge?

"Mama Justa", a nurse and advocate for young African women with AIDS, founded her organization ten years ago in Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania's capital, and has extended her work throughout that country, while becoming known around the world. The American Biography Institute named her Woman of the Year in 2002 and, in 2004, she won the Martin Luther King Jr. Social Justice Award.

Justa turned her home into a centre for young women affected by HIV often through their involvement in the sex trade. She has sought to find them more healthy and sustainable forms of income and opportunities for education and training. She also works with street children and AIDS orphans to keep them safe. Having finished with the AIDS Conference, Mama Justa traveled to Winnipeg and other prairie centres to meet with health, HIV/AIDS and international development activists raising funds and awareness.

Mama Justa praised the Toronto Conference as being very well organized. She was glad of the opportunity to be able to attend and thanked Manitobans and other Canadians who support her partner organization CUSO, as this allowed her to travel here. She also pointed out that Manitobans, through the Manitoba Council for International Co-operation and CUSO, financially support her work on HIV/AIDS in Tanzania.

However, she had a number of concerns about the Toronto Conference as well, shared by many delegates from around the world. The failure of Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper to attend any of the Conference was seen as a slight to this global event. It prevented other world leaders from participating but also wasted an opportunity for our government to lay out its thoughts and policies on a very important issue and to make any related announcements about programs and funding. While the Canadian government said that the Conference politicized the HIV/AIDS issue, many saw the Prime Minister's decision not to attend as the real political move.

While Mama Justa appreciated the involvement of Bill Clinton and Bill and Melinda Gates, and the huge investment the Gates Foundation has earmarked for AIDS work (\$500 million), she expressed concern that money and science are seen as the saviour on this issue. No matter what advancements money buys, through research and development, and no matter what discoveries are made of new drugs and treatments, it will take, she said, political, community and individual will to slow down and stop the disease and to alleviate the poverty and stigma associated with AIDS. If "the people in

charge” – from traditional healers to heads of government – don’t buy into the need for change, from personal morals to program spending, things will only get worse.

The greatest challenge in HIV/AIDS work has been, for her, to find gainful employment for the women she works with, so that they don’t need to return to the streets. While some have found work, in sewing workshops or in the homes of more privileged people, most continue to fight poverty. As members of their families die off from AIDS, they have nothing to go back to in their home communities. With the “middle generation” dying off from AIDS, the older people are left to take care of the children and any viable economic activity ends.

Mama Justa heaped high praise on Canadian Stephen Lewis, United Nations Special Envoy for AIDS in Africa. It was his initiative, she said, that brought together the grandmothers group of AIDS victims at the Toronto Conference for a much-publicized event. Lewis also spoke out passionately against governments that have not taken the initiative against AIDS, for instance South Africa, which has rejected Western research on prevention of the disease. Mama Justa expressed concern about the mixed message that AIDS sufferers receive – from the West a more medical approach, and from their own leaders the suggestion that magical charms will work.

Unfortunately, Stephen Lewis will leave his position at the end of 2006. During the AIDS Conference, when interviewed by the CBC, he was asked whose choice it was that he leave. He answered that, likely having ruffled many feathers in recent years, his bosses saw this as an opportune time, with UN Secretary-General Koffi Annan also set to retire, to ask Lewis to step down. Through his own foundation, Lewis’ efforts will continue. There is also a movement to nominate him for the Nobel Peace Prize.

Mama Justa, faced constantly with an overwhelming task, told her listeners that the occasional success and the support of people around the world keep her going. We have to find, she said, a way to take the issues to ordinary people, not just the activists, and we need to hold leaders’ feet to the fire, and get some action, not just words, on the day-to-day struggles of the sick and the poor. It is, indeed, time to deliver.

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