Editor’s Letter

Hope Floats

June 23, 2010 By Regan Hofmann

Two summers ago, I was in western Kenya observing the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) hard at work in the field. I traveled with the Elizabeth Glaser Pediatric AIDS Foundation to see what America was doing to stop the pandemic in sub-Saharan Africa. There had been considerable political unrest in Nairobi in the weeks just before my trip. But I wasn’t afraid because I was traveling with a group bringing antiretroviral medicines to clinics to prevent mother-to-child transmission of HIV. The people we passed knew that and didn’t threaten us.

PEPFAR’s policies aren’t perfect, but many lives have been saved because of it. The medicines and their ability to keep kids HIV-free have helped create a sense of massive hope. All over, even deep in the bush, the Kenyan people were wearing “Obama for President” T-shirts. (He had yet to be elected.)

While there, I had the epiphany that PEPFAR, while created as a humanitarian program, serves the dual purpose of being great foreign policy. I saw the power of a program like PEPFAR to create enormous pro-American sentiment by giving people a belief in tomorrow.

When I interviewed John Tedstrom, president and CEO of the Global Business Coalition on HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria (GBC) for this issue (page 10), he recounted a story that Britain’s former Prime Minister Gordon Brown had shared with him. Brown recalled a woman in Africa who said that she envied him. When he asked why, she said, “Because you have the luxury of loving your children more than I can, because your children are more likely to survive.”

Tedstrom used this story to illustrate why it’s important for American companies to implement lifesaving programs abroad. When GBC member companies create jobs and income for people in the developing world, they also create hope. And that hope can lead to survival.

PEPFAR is currently at risk as the Obama administration considers reallocating its funds to fight other diseases among children and to improve maternal health. But given the threat that HIV/AIDS poses to women and children, and how effective our international aid programs are at fighting more than HIV/AIDS, I wonder if our new strategy for improving global health can’t include addressing HIV/AIDS.

Current estimates for effectively addressing the global AIDS pandemic sit at about $27 billion annually—and that's if not one more person gets HIV. If President Obama allows PEPFAR's funding to wither, not only will he leave many people to perish, but he will also telegraph that AIDS is no longer a priority for the United States. And he'll erode pro-American sentiment created from our aid for AIDS.

The world needs Obama to have the foresight to see the price we will eventually pay for not continuing the fight against AIDS. And to recognize that the problem of the AIDS pandemic is as threatening to the world's bottom line as the recession itself. And, finally, to understand that through a successful war on AIDS, we will simultaneously protect mothers the world over. Not to mention allowing them the luxury of believing in tomorrow and being able to love their children as hard as we love ours.

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