Flying United

How to address the crisis of AIDS funding? Ask the citizens of the world to shell out a couple of bucks whenever they book a flight.

January 1, 2010 By Regan Hofmann

There is no question that the spread of HIV is outpacing our ability to stop it. For every person on antiretroviral (ARV) treatment, there are three new infections globally. And while the cost of losing that race can be counted in the number of people who die of AIDS, our inability to stop the spread of HIV also has a negative impact on the global economy—and as a result, the security of the world. The cost to treat all people estimated to be living with HIV who need ARVs is staggering—and growing every day.

Simply put, if we can't find enough money to better prevent, treat and eventually cure this disease, the virus's toll will be tallied not only in terms of human lives—but also in terms of how these millions of deaths will destabilize the world economy. When entire generations of people die, it seriously impedes a nation's ability to produce a gross national product. And it could create dangerous breaks in the chain of supply and demand—leading to civil unrest and even war between nations.

Those who think HIV won't ever touch their lives may be surprised when there is no one left to make the sneakers, reading glasses, medical devices and cars that many of us depend on. There's a good reason that the Global Business Coalition on HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria has been able to convince large multinational companies to give money to fight these diseases. Not only is it socially responsible for the likes of Chevron, De Beers and Levi Strauss (all members of the GBC) to educate their employees about ways to avoid deadly pandemics; it is also cheaper for any company to keep its current workforce healthy than it is to constantly replace and retrain people. And a healthy workforce is essential to the economy of any company, or country.

A 2008 report by U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon indicated that for the world to meet universal access targets for AIDS treatment by 2010, we would have needed to lay out an additional $25 billion between 2008 and 2010. Instead, AIDS funding has flatlined and, in some cases, decreased. Addressing the United Nations last year, Ki-moon said, "Now is not the time to falter. The economic crisis should not be an excuse to abandon commitments—it should be an impetus to make the right investments that will yield benefits for generations to come."

The recent downturn in the global economy and the fact that many other equally critical social

causes compete for the same dollars as HIV/AIDS mean that if we're not careful, an HIV diagnosis may one day again be a death knell.

Two programs that have historically provided significant finances to the AIDS battle worldwide—the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria and the (United States') President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief—are not flush enough to meet current global demand. And when investors see that their donations fail to meet a philanthrophy's mission, funders can develop cold feet and reallocate their money. Yet, ironically, it is in times of financial crisis that it doesn't pay to pull back.

In November 2009, Funders Concerned About AIDS (FCAA) and the European HIV/AIDS Funders Group (EFG) documented that while HIV/AIDS-focused philanthropy among U.S.-based funders increased in 2008 versus 2007 by about $63 million (11 percent), that uptick was the result of increased donations from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the world's largest private foundation involved in fighting AIDS. Without the Gates gift, funding from U.S.-based philanthropies was flat from 2006 to 2007 and dropped by about 3 percent from 2007 to 2008. Meanwhile, the global demand for help continues to swell.

But a Switzerland-based organization—the Millennium Foundation for Innovative Finance for Health—has a seemingly ingenious approach to finding fresh money to fight HIV/AIDS, TB and malaria: Ask each jet-setting citizen of the world to donate a few bills from his or her own wallet.

The notion of asking the world to give a penny to fight poverty/homelessness/disease/fill-in-other-social-cause-here is not a new one. Think of the March of Dimes' efforts to collect loose change at store checkouts. The challenge with worldwide fund drives that count pennies has always been the overhead cost involved in getting those pennies centralized, counted and redistributed.

Enter Massive Good, which is the Millennium Foundation's solution to taking a buck here and there and efficiently turning our pocket change into a massive fund that can change the lives of millions around the world. The concept is simple. Instead of asking a few people to give millions, Massive Good asks millions to give a few (bucks). Whenever people book an airline flight—either online or through a travel agent—they'll be asked to give $2 to the Millennium Foundation, a nonprofit dedicated to ending HIV/AIDS, TB and malaria.

For the past two years, Bernard Salomé, managing director of Millennium, has flown around the world lobbying governments to allow programs that will enable all travelers to give a dollar or two to Massive Good. So far, Salomé has convinced the leading representatives of the global travel and tourism industry to support the project. Salomé's other huge coup was getting the three companies—Amadeus, Sabre and Travelport—that together supply the software and operating systems used by most travel agents worldwide to set aside their competitive differences and unite for global health.

Given the volume of international air travel, the fund could raise millions, even billions, of dollars. Not to mention a little awareness along the way.

But will people care? That is the $100,000 question.

Salomé, a global-economist-turned-humanitarian-aid-hunter, believes that people will do it. “Our message is quite simple: You can change the world one click at a time from where you are sitting and join a movement that will do massive good.”

We hope he’s right. It’s counterintuitive, but one of the best ways out of a recession is to spend money. And certainly, when it comes to fighting HIV/AIDS, TB and malaria, being stingy today will unquestionably raise the price that we will pay—as people and a planet—tomorrow for our tightfistedness and shortsighted view of global health.

Hey brother, sister, can you spare 20 dimes?

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