Opening Statement at Press Conference on HIV Situation on Uganda following the UNAIDS Global Review Panel Mission to Uganda

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A word of thanks to the UNAIDS Global Review Mission

Let me start by thanking the UNAIDS Global Review Panel Mission to Uganda led by His Excellency Lennarth Hjelmåker, Sweden’s Ambassador for Global Health; and members Dr. Anders Nordstrom, WHO Representative in Sierra Leone and Special Advisor to the Global Review Panel; Mr. Kent Dieter Buse, UNAIDS Chief, Strategic Policy Directions and Member of the Global Review Panel; and Her Excellency, Susan Eckey, Norwegian Ambassador to Uganda; for dedicating their time and energy to review UNAIDS Programme in Uganda.

Uganda as a role Model in combating HIV/AIDS

Ladies and gentlemen; the panel has convened at a critical time for reflection on the state of Uganda’s HIV AIDS response and the role of players in making it a success.

As background; Uganda taught the world how to respond effectively to HIV in the 80s and 90s. We learnt from Uganda and organisations like The AIDS Support Organisation (TASO) how community action is integral to winning the fight against HIV; it was from Uganda that important scientific information was derived on HIV prevention, with
the clinical trials in Rakai District. It was also Uganda that taught the world that leadership is an important game-changer as well. Some of us may know about the efforts H.E. President Museveni made, moving from one community to the next, teaching people about HIV. It was President Museveni that gave the global AIDS community terminology such as "the window of opportunity" and "zero grazing". As a result in the late 80’s to early 90’s, Uganda was registering staggering drops in the spread of HIV.

The HIV/AIDS Situation in Uganda Today

Today, HIV has rebounded. Uganda has an important story to tell about how we got here, and how important it is not to relent in our efforts. It was also Uganda that showed the world that when you take your ‘foot off the pedal’, the epidemic will return. There are many sobering reminders of this in the country. Young people, especially girls aged between 15 and 24 are disproportionately affected by HIV infection. Among adolescent girls; every single hour, 2 young women are getting infected with HIV in Uganda. The prevalence of adolescent girls stands at 9.1 percent, compared to the national prevalence rate of 7.3 percent.
We saw this rebound happen from around 2010 and we do not want to go back there again. That is why I am pleased that the Global Review Panel chose Uganda for its country level consultation - we have a compelling story to tell about what it will take, to get to the end of AIDS by 2030.

While there has been encouraging progress to mount an effort to curb the epidemic yet again; as it stands, as of 2015, Uganda registers 230 new infections a day. Despite widely available anti-retroviral therapy, 76 people die of AIDS-related causes every single day! This illustrates the urgent unfinished business of ending AIDS.

What needs to be done

The good news however, is we have all the tools we need today, to achieve epidemic control and to achieve the 2030 agenda target of "ending AIDS as a public health threat".

To illustrate; when the "Global Plan" to eliminate mother-to-child transmission of HIV was launched, many thought UNAIDS and its partners were being too ambitious. However, we are closer than we thought we would be to elimination, and I am proud to say that Uganda...
achieved the highest reduction in new infections in children (87%) of the 21 priority countries of the global plan worldwide. As a result, 9 in 10 HIV positive pregnant and breastfeeding women are on treatment and infections in babies have fallen almost tenfold, from 30,000 in 2010 to only 3,500 in 2015. Together we can get to zero!

Today, 18 million people living with HIV globally are alive and on treatment: of these, 900,000 are in Uganda. When the target to put 15 million people on antiretroviral treatment by 2015 was set, many thought this was a pipe dream, but collectively, we surpassed the target well ahead of the 2015 deadline. This shows that consolidated efforts from government, civil society, private sector and development partners work.

As the UN, we need a strengthened, better financed UNAIDS, the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV and AIDS (both the Secretariat and its co-sponsors), to mobilise and motivate both a global and domestic drive towards zero new infections, zero AIDS-related deaths and zero discrimination.

More than ever, we need the international solidarity that secured unprecedented resources than have ever been mobilised for a single disease. Uganda has been and continues to be the recipient of generous international support in various areas. However, we also need
the Government of Uganda to take on increasing responsibility for its HIV programme and to focus on how we can as a joint team support the drive to zero. Recent calls to reduce the health and education budgets (important sectors for the fight against HIV) at this critical time do not augur well for ending the epidemic. We must increase investments in the well-being of Ugandans to achieve the National Vision and Development objectives.

Uganda’s HIV success story was driven by the direct leadership of His Excellency President Yoweri Kaguta Museveni, who “rolled up his sleeves” and led national HIV campaigns on educating Ugandans about behaviour change, the strategies for managing HIV and challenging stigma and discrimination. These efforts led to a phenomenal reduction in new HIV infections even in an era where funding was not as substantial and where anti-retroviral therapy was not widely available. Many countries came to Uganda to learn and be inspired by Uganda’s experience.

I would like to use the opportunity to call on His Excellency President Yoweri Museveni to once again take back his direct leadership in this area, so that Uganda can once again show the world that the end of
AIDS as a public health threat is possible while pursuing development and industrialisation.

Ultimately, there is hope amidst the struggle to end the multi-faceted face of AIDS. From addressing child marriage; to bringing to the fore the danger of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM); as well as championing sexuality education, there is still work to be done in Uganda. Ending AIDS as a public health threat will entail reaching everyone, and leaving no-one behind. At the end of the day, all Ugandans must be reached with life-saving information and services.

I invite each one of us to champion this drive and on behalf of the United Nations in Uganda, I pledge our commitment to continue working with the people and Government, development partners, private sector, cultural and religious leaders to promote the health and well-being of Uganda’s populations and contribute to Uganda’s development and, in by 2030 End AIDS.

Together we can.

Thank you.