

Aid agencies and the HIV/Aids crisis



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- 1 The HIV/AIDS epidemic threatens people in every part of the world. For example, it destroys the health, and lives of millions of people. It also shatters families and communities and leaves millions of children orphaned. It undermines whole countries by robbing them of the young, able-bodied people needed to work in industry and agriculture. It ravages entire continents. While sub-Saharan Africa (the area of Africa south of the Sahara desert) has about ten per cent of the world's population, it has almost two-thirds of all people living with HIV (UNAIDS, 2004).
- 2 No part of the world is untouched by HIV/AIDS. While you may have heard quite a lot about the scale of the crisis in Africa, you may be surprised to learn that it is in Europe that HIV has been growing fastest. According to a World Health Organization report published in 2004, between 1995 and 2003 the number of new infections in Western Europe doubled to more than 365,000. In central and eastern Europe it rose from 27,000 to 370,000 (Boseley, 2004). The fact that HIV/AIDS is a global crisis has several implications. First, there are limits to what the governments of individual countries can do to fight it: although one government may slow down the spread of HIV in a particular country by an effective public education campaign it is unlikely to stop all transmission. Second, global travel is now common which increases the probability that diseases will spread.
- 3 The global nature of the HIV/AIDS crisis means that it needs to be tackled at a global level. In other words, international action is required. A key organisation at the international level is the United Nations (UN). This is a form of global government. It is funded by contributions from governments around the world and has its own parliament, the General Assembly, in which practically every country in the world has a seat. The General Assembly meets regularly to discuss and vote on important issues.
- 4 As an international government, the UN is involved in many different areas, including health. It has specialist wings or agencies that deal with health and health-related issues such as the World Health Organization and UNICEF (the United Nations Children's Fund) which concentrates on improving the health and lives of children around the world.
- 5 Many non-governmental organisations (NGOs) also tackle health issues across the world, for example the Red Cross and Red Crescent, which often step in following earthquakes and other disasters. Another example is Oxfam, which works among the world's poorest people. NGOs do not get the bulk of their funds from governments, and are independent of government (although they often work in co-operation with governments and the UN).
- 6 Both governments and non-government organisations are involved in tackling the HIV/AIDS crisis, for example, the United Nations has brought together ten of its agencies to form the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS). UNAIDS aims to 'prevent new HIV infections, care for those already infected, and mitigate the impact of the epidemic' (UNAIDS, 2004, p. 1).
- 7 In 2001, UNAIDS launched the '3 by 5' initiative with the goal of providing anti-retroviral drugs to 3 million people with HIV/AIDS living in developing countries by 2005. It emphasises the need to get anti-retroviral drugs to people in Africa, Asia and other poorer parts of the world. For the 3 by 5 initiative to succeed, UNAIDS needs support from governments throughout the world and from NGOs like Oxfam and the Red Cross and Red Crescent. It also needs the support of big business, including the big pharmaceutical companies – big pharma.

(The Open University (2008) Understanding health, Milton Keynes, The Open University, pp. 131–32)