

Vulnerability

1. SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL CONTEXTS

Socio-economic and cultural contexts are determining factors in the spread of HIV/AIDS. Because these circumstances differ in from place to place, countries, districts and even villages may have quite different HIV/AIDS stories and current profiles. But the WHO currently estimates that nine out of ten people with HIV live in areas where poverty, the subordinate status of women and children, and discrimination are prevalent.

Development practice with respect to HIV is paradigmatically the practice of human development. This is so for significant reasons. The focus of HIV is people's sexual, psychological and social relations and behaviour. No roads, fertilizers, procurement systems or stock exchanges are available to distract attention from or mask the fact that people are the focus of its practice. It is critical to explore the relationship between economic, social and cultural variables and the spread of HIV — who becomes infected with the virus and with what spatial distribution. Examples which have been identified as having a causal role in the spread of the virus include gender (more specifically the economic, social and cultural lack of autonomy of women, which places them at risk of infection); poverty and social exclusion (the absence of economic, social and political rights); and labour mobility (which is more than the physical mobility of persons and includes the effects on values and traditional structures associated with the processes of modernization). At the core of the problem of transmission of HIV are issues of gender and poverty. Thus, the classical components of development — transportation systems, labour markets, economic growth, governance, poverty and more — are within the causal framework which determines the patterns and speed of spread of the virus. These components will also be affected by the impact of the spread of the virus, its associated mortality and morbidity and the burden of dependency and social disruption it will create. No longer can the implications of failures to alleviate poverty or success in employment be understood in isolation. All of the components of development affect what happens with the HIV epidemic.

(Elizabeth Reid, UNPD, Facing Aids 14)

At the root of the global socio-economic and cultural problems related to HIV/AIDS are the unjust distribution and accumulation of wealth, land and power. This leads to various forms of malaise in human communities. There are more and more cases of economic and political migration of people within and outside of their own countries. These uprooted peoples may be migrant workers looking for better-paying jobs or refugees from economic, political or religious conflicts. Racism, gender discrimination and sexual harassment, economic inequalities, the lack of political will for change, huge external and internal debts, critical health problems, illicit drug and sex trades, including an increase in child prostitution, fragmentation and marginalization of communities — all these factors, which affect “developed” as well as “developing” societies, form a web of inter-related global problems which intensify the vulnerability of human communities to HIV/AIDS.

(Facing Aids, p.23f)

2. HUMAN BEINGS IN RELATION

To be human is to be in relation, to be involved in a web of connections with others — in the family, at work, in the church, at leisure. Above and beyond all this human relating is the relationship God freely offers to all in love. Relations with other human beings, like relations with God, may manifest the same respect for the otherness of the other which makes freedom possible and the same warmth of relationship in the form of love.

Christians may speak confidently concerning God who is known in relationship because such a relationship of freedom and love was enacted visibly in Jesus Christ. During his life — which is as important for belief as his death, although it has had less attention in the Western theological tradition — Jesus showed in practice what it is to live this relationship with God, encountering others with the promise and demand of the kingdom.

There was in the way Jesus behaved an openness to people of all kinds, without barriers of class or race or gender. Just as God in love accompanies all creation, so Jesus went among the poor, telling them that they were loved by God even if they had not been able to keep the law scrupulously. He dined with a rich Pharisee, and told another who came to see him at night that he needed new vision and had to be born again (John 3:3). He healed Jewish lepers and a Roman soldier's child. There were women in the group that travelled with him, and unlike many holy men he did not shrink from the touch of a prostitute. In all that breadth of relationship, Jesus incarnated the *accessibility* of God, who “shows no partiality” (Acts 10:34; Rom. 2:11), but is open to all — rich or poor, sick or healthy, old or young.

When people and churches live out of relationship with God and follow Jesus, therefore, they will be continually open to others and offer relationship to them, even to those who seem very different.

Just as there is no closing off of relationships in the gospel accounts of Jesus, so churches cannot withdraw into being congenial groups of the like-minded, refusing openness to and esteem for others who are physically or socially different.

A similar observation emerges from considering Jesus' relations with the religious establishment of his day. He attended the synagogue and was certainly no religious dissenter. But he denounced or bypassed religious practices and ordinances which put difficulties in the way of ordinary people in their relationship with God. Not only did he preach the immediacy of unconditional divine love and forgiveness, but he also put it into practice through his own accessibility and his going to where the people were. All this has something to say to the churches about human being-in-relation. It speaks powerfully against churches which confess that nothing separates us from the love of God (Rom. 8:39) and then go on to set up barriers of their own between themselves and other people.

There can be no valuable relationship in which each does not desire the *well-being* of the others. God's concern for the well-being of creation is visible in Jesus' healing of the sick and his exorcising of demons. Medical work and forms of other healing maintain that tradition. This is one way human beings express both the openness and the esteem and affection of their being-in-relation to those with HIV/AIDS, even though no cure has been found.

Relationships continually require an enlargement of understanding. No one understands from the start everything about being in relation. It seems that this was the case even for Jesus. The gospels tell of Jesus' encounter with a Syrophenician woman who asked for his help (Mark 7:24-30; Matt. 15:21-28). At first he answered that his calling was to Israel alone; but through this woman he came to understand that his ministry was to extend far more widely. Similarly, human beings in relation are always being called on to extend their understanding, especially when confronted by new situations like that brought by the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Again, Jesus praying in the garden of Gethsemane that the cup of suffering might be taken from him does not appear as one who is iron-clad in divine immunity, but rather as a person who went forward without the certainty of any such position and *trusted* in God. Nor are we required to be invulnerable and certain in our relationships. Rather we are called to be open, learning and trusting.

It is demanding to follow the way of Jesus in relationships. Such open being-in-relation, which acknowledges no barriers but seeks the well-being of all, will seldom be popular with the authorities. In political terms, Jesus was crucified because of who he was and what he did represented a threat to the power which maintained public order as the Roman authorities saw it and to the religious sensibilities of the Jewish leaders. Yet one understanding of the resurrection is to see in retrospect that no matter how abandoned and forsaken by God (Mark 15:34) Jesus felt himself to be, God was present through it all and finally vindicated him. Not even the greatest misunderstanding or repression can separate those who are “on the way” from this sustaining love of God and from the fellowship of the church.

(Facing Aids, p.23f)