

Engaging the private sector in global health

The campaign focus of World AIDS Day, which falls on December 1, is to mobilise all sectors of society into providing leadership, innovation, and vision in addressing HIV/AIDS. But is everyone really on board?

The private sector—in particular businesses and corporations operating in some of the hardest hit countries—has been conspicuous in its absence during more than two decades of dialogue around tackling HIV/AIDS. This neglect is not because HIV/AIDS holds no relevance. Among the few African-based companies that have dared to look, HIV prevalence rates of between 12% and 24% have been documented among their workforce. Anglo American, one of the world's biggest mining companies, estimates that 21% of its workforce in eastern and southern Africa, approximately 23 400 employees, are HIV positive. Amid growing recognition that change cannot be achieved through government action alone, policymakers have therefore increasingly shifted their attention to the potential role of the private sector.

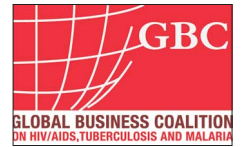
This new momentum has led more and more businesses to explore their role in addressing ill-health among their employees and in the communities in which they operate. To larger businesses, at least, this makes economic and commercial sense. AIDS hits people of a working age hardest, and as individuals fall sick, absenteeism increases and productivity declines. Unprecedented levels of civil society mobilisation on the issue of global poverty and health, too, is something that many businesses—concerned about brand awareness and wavering bottom lines—simply cannot afford to ignore. Diamonds rapidly lose their sparkle when associated with a labour force dying needlessly of HIV/AIDS, or being forced into unemployment for want of a few cheap drugs. In this month's issue of the journal, Benji Wilson reports on the work of the De Beers Group in Botswana. The mining and construction sectors—which rely heavily on migrant workers—have been particularly badly hit by HIV/AIDS. In partnership with the government, De Beers funds an HIV clinic for both miners and the communities that have sprung up around Jwaneng mine.

Take a look at the bigger picture, however, and the private-sector response so far has been woefully inadequate. This represents an enormous missed opportunity. A survey of businesses in South Africa found that of 92 mining sector firms, only 26%

offered antiretroviral therapy (ART), with 40% having no HIV/AIDS policy at all. Most in-house workplace programmes focus on prevention—education and free testing. Among the construction sector, of 201 companies approached, only 24% had an HIV/AIDS policy, with only 3% providing ART to their workers. An additional concern is the growing trend by businesses towards investment in pre-employment screening programmes. In Tanzania, an estimated 50% of businesses in one study did screening to exclude HIV-positive workers. Although undoubtedly an efficient way of ensuring an HIV-free workforce, such policies divert the burden of AIDS to the public sector and to households, and fuel the stigmatisation of what has become a treatable disease.

So where do we go from here? Clearly we need to facilitate greater involvement of the private sector and on a bigger scale. The launch of (PRODUCT) Red at the World Economic Forum in 2006 to raise donations for the Global Fund, supported by a plethora of multinational corporations, is a welcome step. Yet we need to look beyond the big players. Strategies are needed to engage small and medium size enterprises, which will need incentives and assistance to act. A coordinated business response to tackling other infectious diseases, such as malaria and tuberculosis, is also required. In Mozambique, for example, malaria remains the leading cause of absenteeism and death even with the advance of AIDS. Additionally, we need to further explore the best way to deliver well targeted and managed programmes. Robust research on what works is currently lacking, often because companies remain reluctant to engage with external researchers or to fund this work.

Clearly there are numerous challenges to ensuring a sustained effort from the private sector on global health issues. Crucial initiatives such as the Global Business Coalition on HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria, an alliance of over 200 companies, provide an opportunity to rectify many of the current shortfalls. Their recent reports on the corporate response to HIV/AIDS and malaria show that a commitment to addressing these diseases can be a core component of a successful business strategy, and among business leaders there is now a clear willingness to do more. Capitalising on this new momentum will ensure that the private sector no longer remains an untapped resource. ■ *The Lancet Infectious Diseases*



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For more information on **World AIDS Day** see <http://www.worldaidscampaign.info/>

For more information on **Anglo American and HIV/AIDS** see *AIDS* 2007; 21 (suppl 3): S79-S84; DOI:10.1097/01.aids.0000279697.40568.f0

For more information on the **survey of businesses in South Africa** see *AIDS* 2007; 21 (suppl 3): S31-S39

For more information on **PRODUCT (Red)** see *Editorial Lancet* 2006; 368: 423

For more information on the **Global Business Coalition's report on the state of business and HIV/AIDS (2006)** see <http://www3.cpi.cam.ac.uk/pdf/global%20business%20coalition%20on%20HIVAIDS.pdf>

For more information on the **Global Business Coalition's report on the corporate response to malaria** see <http://www.businessfightsaids.org/attf/cf/%7B4AF0E874-E9A0-4D86-BA28-96C3BC31180A%7D/GBC-Malaria-Report-July-2007.pdf>