

## Summary points

HIV and AIDS threaten social survival in vulnerable countries

Treating the HIV/AIDS epidemic as a disaster could speed up the response

Declaring a state of emergency would overcome barriers to multisector cooperation and facilitate access to cheaper drugs

Resources could be better coordinated, eliminating duplication and ensuring everyone is working to the same goal

Governments should be encouraged and rewarded for adopting a disaster response to HIV and AIDS

see why a government may be hesitant to declare a state of emergency. Declaring a state of emergency forces the government to publicly admit that their country is in a vulnerable condition, which may lead to strained international trade ties. Strong political commitment to tackle HIV and AIDS at the national level, however, has been one of the factors associated with success in countries like Uganda.<sup>11</sup> Thus, governments should be encouraged and supported for taking a proactive stance against HIV and AIDS.

In addition, if a country declares a state of emergency but does not have the resources to respond, this could highlight the helplessness of the government and potentially lead to negative political ramifications internally. These consequences could be outweighed by the benefits of immediate and transparent political commitment, as shown by the recent success of Vietnam in securing outside help to respond to its SARS outbreak.<sup>9</sup> The international community must therefore also be proactive in committing and providing necessary help and resources to any country willing to make important steps towards tackling their epidemic.

Importantly, providing any agency the power to over-ride bureaucratic, political, and legal barriers to tackle the epidemic carries the risk of potential abuse. The disaster management response must therefore be carefully monitored by the national governments and the international community to ensure that individual human rights are carefully balanced with the need to protect society against the further spread of HIV/AIDS. International human rights bodies have carefully considered this inherent trade-off and have articulated which rights can and cannot be overridden in times of emergency.<sup>12</sup>

Governments may also be concerned about the duration of the state of emergency once it has been declared. A phase based decision making system, however, could provide a checklist for countries to reassess the effect that HIV is having on their society. Thus, countries would be able to “phase in” as well as “phase out” of a state of emergency dependent on progress.

There are many complex issues that a disaster management response will not resolve, and this

approach should not be seen as a replacement for existing initiatives or a cookie cutter solution to the epidemic. We hope, however, that our suggestions will provide a basis for generating new thinking and a better coordinated, more effective and timely response to the mounting HIV/AIDS crisis.

Contributors and sources: Four of the authors (LS, KP, STJ, JML) have worked on policy and treatment issues relating to HIV and AIDS. Three of the authors (LS, KP, STJ), along with other students at Harvard School of Public Health, founded AIDS TANK, a group to promote new thinking and action on the HIV/AIDS crisis. LS, KP, STJ, and JML wrote a paper on the applicability of the disaster framework to HIV/AIDS response strategies in a disaster management course taught by JL as part of a master of public health course at Harvard. This paper serves as the basis for the article presented here. Please see [www.hsph.harvard.edu/psb205/hiv](http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/psb205/hiv) for further background.

Competing interests: LS conducted her practicum research for her master of public health with the Millennium Development Project HIV/AIDS Task Force. She also acted as a temporary technical adviser to the WHO department of HIV, tuberculosis, and malaria.

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## Endpiece

### Differences

The old man pays regard to riches, and the youth reverences virtue. The old man deifies prudence, and the young commits himself to magnanimity and chance . . . Age looks with anger on the temerity of youth and youth with contempt on the scrupulosity of age.

Samuel Johnson (1709-84)

Fred Charatan,  
retired geriatric physician, Florida