

Testimony

Ambassador-at-Large Dr. John N. Nkengasong, U.S. Global AIDS Coordinator and
Special Representative for Global Health Diplomacy

Senate Foreign Relations Committee Hearing

PEPFAR at 20: Achieving and Sustaining Epidemic Control

April 19, 2023

10:00 a.m.

Thank you, Chairman Menendez, Ranking Member Risch, and other distinguished Committee members. I am deeply honored to appear before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, which has provided visionary leadership for PEPFAR since its inception in 2003.

In the last 20 years, PEPFAR has saved 25 million lives, PEPFAR has strengthened health systems, and PEPFAR has changed the course of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. The American people should be proud of these remarkable achievements as they are their achievements. We all know that these gains are fragile and without continued leadership of this Congress, we risk reversing the gains with a resurgence of the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

Back in 2003, HIV/AIDS was a death sentence and for instance in Africa, average life expectancy had dropped significantly by 35 years in Zimbabwe and 12 years in South Africa.

This year, we are celebrating the 20th anniversary of PEPFAR – and it has been, without a doubt the greatest act of humanity in the history of infectious disease. Thanks to the generosity of the American people, PEPFAR’s investments are supporting over 20 million people on lifesaving treatment and have prevented HIV infections in 5.5 million babies.

PEPFAR has also played a key role in transforming societies. For example, in PEPFAR-supported countries, GDP per capita has grown 2 percentage points faster, girls and boys are 9 percentage points more likely to be in school.

The previously unthinkable goal of ending HIV/AIDS as a public health threat is now within our grasp, all due to the unwavering commitment of the members of this Committee and the bipartisan, bicameral support of ten Congresses and four Administrations.

Our focus is on the goal of ending the HIV/AIDS pandemic by 2030. On December 1st, World AIDS Day we released a five-year strategy that provides a plan for how to get there and I want to share a few highlights.

One key area of focus is health equity. There are still 1.5 million new HIV infections globally and over 650,000 AIDS-related deaths each year. A disproportionate number of those are in three categories – (1) adolescent girls and young women, (2) children, and (3) the five key populations. We must continue to know our gaps and close our gaps.

To lead with data and follow the science, we must align our programs to locations and populations where HIV/AIDS is the most concentrated. We will work with affected communities, partner governments, the private sector and civil society partners to ensure the dignity of all people.

Another key area of focus is sustaining the response. HIV is a lifelong disease, and our partner countries will be responsible for supporting millions of people on treatment for the remainder of their lives.

For the first time in PEPFAR's history, I had the honor of addressing a special session of 33 Heads of State at the African Union Summit this February. That session resulted in a declaration that the Heads of State will host a dedicated summit later this year to develop a roadmap of actions and investments to 2030. As PEPFAR, we work hand-in-hand with partner country governments to advance these commitments.

Mr. Chairman and all members of this distinguished Committee, what once was unimaginable is now very possible - ending HIV/AIDS as a public health threat by 2030. Yet our gains are incredibly fragile. If a person living with HIV does not have access to medication for just three weeks, their viral load will increase and they will be at risk for transmission and developing AIDS. With your leadership, we can protect our gains and reach the 2030 goal.

That is why I look forward to working with this committee to reauthorize PEPFAR. Thank you for the ongoing support for PEPFAR's work. I look forward to your questions.