

## Technical report

### AIDS in the 1990s: Meeting the challenge

As of today, some 9–11 million people have been infected with the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and this number will more than triple in the next eight years, according to conservative estimates by the World Health Organization (WHO). As more people become HIV-infected, and as those already infected gradually fall ill (AIDS takes an average of 10 years to develop), the pandemic will wreak ever more devastating demographic, social and economic havoc.

This was the message delivered in October 1991 by Dr. Michael H. Merson, Director of the WHO Global Programme on AIDS, to financial and political leaders gathered in Bangkok, Thailand, for a special session on AIDS organized by the World Bank. "The AIDS pandemic has become a major factor to the reckoned with in the world economy", said Dr. Merson. "The deaths of as many as one-fifth of young and middle-aged adults over a short period of time will lead to social turmoil, economic disruption and even political destabilization in many countries."

The meeting was also addressed by Thailand's Minister of the Prime Minister's Office, Mechai Viravaidya, who stressed that AIDS is now a global development issue rather than simply a health concern. Minister Mechai urged all sectors of the community to join forces in reducing the further spread of infection, noting that investing in AIDS prevention efforts is one of the most attractive investments countries can make.

In Asia, where HIV spread began only during the late 1980s, WHO projects that the rate of new infections will continue to climb dramatically until early in the next century. As a result, by the mid to late 1990s, more Asians than Africans are expected to become infected each year.

In Thailand, where the AIDS epidemic is considered still to be in its early stages, an estimated 200000–400000 people have already become HIV-infected. Unless significant behavioural changes occur, government officials believe the number could climb to 2–4 million by the year 2000.

In East and Central Africa where one-third of sexually active adults in many urban areas are already infected, child mortality rates are reverting to their 1980 levels, cancelling out the impressive gains made through immunization and other child survival programmes, while in some areas adult mortality has shown a threefold increase within just five years.

In African populations with a current high prevalence of HIV, life expectancy is now likely to decline slightly by the year 2000, instead of rising from 50 to 60 years. If projections for HIV infections in Asia become fact, a similar demographic scenario will be seen on that continent, becoming most evident in the second decade of the twenty-first century.

The direct health costs of the pandemic, although substantial, will be dwarfed by the indirect costs, in particular the loss of income and the decreased productivity of the workforce. In the agricultural sector alone, this will translate into the growing of subsistence rather than cash crops and an emphasis on the less labour-intensive crops.

As of today, HIV-infected women have given birth to almost 1 million infected children – of whom more than half have already developed AIDS or died – and to some 2 million uninfected children who will inevitably be orphaned. Some 10–15 million children, mostly in sub-Saharan Africa, will lose their mothers to AIDS by the turn of the century even as the extended family – the traditional fall-back for child-rearing – is undermined by the pandemic.

"What these dry statistics mean in human terms is almost unimaginable for those who have not seen the pandemic at first hand", said Dr. Merson. "But we have learned that people *can* change their behaviour if they understand that their very survival is at stake. Prevention campaigns *can* work if they receive top priority and full commitment from government leaders at the highest level. But that commitment must come now, and from all sectors of society, while there is still time to avert to worst human, social and economic costs of the pandemic".

World Health Organization, Geneva