



Action against AIDS Germany

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## Global Health Champion Germany?! From HIV to SARS-CoV-2

By Daniel Townsend

*This report from the opening panel was written on the occasion of our online conference "Global Health Champion Germany?!" held on World Aids Day 2021. From HIV to SARS-CoV-2. What have we (not) learned?". We asked Daniel Townsend to write about his impressions from the panel with a particular focus on the perspective of communities living with HIV, TB and malaria. We have asked for no objective account of the discussions and proceedings of the session. We thank Daniel for his reflections!*

### Executive Summary



Photo: Daniel Townsend

This event was an annual event organized by Action against AIDS Germany in cooperation with partner organizations. It follows previous policy dialogues that seek to bring attention to essential communities based on the global response to the HIV epidemic and Germany's role as an accountable actor in global health dialogues. This is a report of the opening panel with keynote speeches from Peter Sands, Executive Director of the Global Fund; Winnie Byanyima, Executive Director of UNAIDS and Cindy Kelemi, Executive Director at Botswana Network on Ethics, Law and HIV/AIDS, as well as moderated discussion with Dianne Stewart, Deputy Director, External Relations, Global Fund and Matt Kavanagh, Special Advisor to the

Executive Director on Policy, Advocacy and Knowledge Management UNAIDS. Rachel Ong, Global Fund Advocates Network Asia-Pacific Coordinator and Christine Stegling, Executive Director, Frontline AIDS, moderated the panel. The keynote speeches focused on providing an update on the

impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, caused by SARS-CoV-2, on ending AIDS, TB and Malaria. The subsequent moderated discussion was focused on the following questions:

- What are the main differences being a Global Health Champions nowadays compared to the situation 20 years ago?
- What experiences can be transferred from our history with HIV to SARS-CoV-2?
- How do we achieve the health-related Sustainable Development Goals (SDG3) and the goal of ending AIDS by 2030, also with regard to the situation arising from SARS-CoV-2?
- What changes result from SARS-CoV-2, and how can we ensure that the basic principles of the Global Fund and UNAIDS with its mechanisms to ensure the participation of key populations based on human rights principles are strengthened instead of weakened

The discussions in this panel were lively, with contributions from a wide range of participants. The purpose of this report is to summarise the main points made.

### Report of Keynote Speeches



Winnie Byanyima, Screenshot, Opening Panel

*"Where leaders are acting boldly and together bringing together cutting edge science, delivering services that meet all people's needs, protecting human rights and sustaining adequate financing, AIDS debts and new infections are becoming rare."*

- *Winne Byanyima, Executive Director, UNAIDS*

The panel was opened by **Winnie Byanyima**, Executive Director of the UNAIDS, who presented pertinent facts concerning the current state of the HIV epidemic, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the need for urgent action through more significant investments to respond to colliding global health emergencies. She congratulated Germany, which stepped up its commitment and leadership in the global response to these emergencies. While noting the successes and laudable actions demonstrated since the start of the COVID, she issued a stark warning that AIDS remains a pandemic and continues to spread by social, political, and legal inequalities. In this regard, she urged leaders to address these inequalities urgently and adopt approaches that center their elimination. Noting that we are not bending the curve fast enough on our current trajectory, she urged governments to move more quickly on a set of concrete actions agreed by member states in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and to end AIDS by 2030. A central part of this will be to ensure that community systems are resilient and community infrastructures are resourced as a part of a robust public health system underpinned by robust civil society accountability. This approach should also include the development of policies to ensure that new treatment and prevention technologies are accessible to key populations who are most affected by HIV. She concluded her address by reiterating the importance of elevating the human rights of populations that are often marginalized in society but remain at the centre of the epidemic.



Peter Sands, Screenshot, Opening Panel

*It has been 40 years since the first cases of AIDS were reported. In that time, more than 77 million people have become infected with HIV, and over 34 million have died from AIDS-related illnesses. 20 years ago, HIV seemed unbeatable. But over two decades, thanks to unprecedented global activism and solidarity by many partners, extraordinary progress has been achieved..... But COVID-19 now threatens to derail decades of progress for HIV and other diseases such as Tuberculosis and Malaria. The pandemic has put an additional burden on already overstretched health systems, and the socio-economic impact has been devastating for the poorest and most marginalized. For the first time in the Global Fund's history, key programmatic results for HIV declined in 2020.*

- Peter Sands, Executive Director, GFTAM

**Peter Sands**, Executive Director, the Global Fund, the keynote focused on the stark challenges the COVID-19 pandemic has brought to the fight against the HIV epidemic. He presented pertinent and worrying facts on the currents and the threat of reversing the progress made. COVID-19 has exposed the most vulnerable to even more significant risks as lockdowns and restrictions to curb the new pandemic, cut access to life-saving HIV treatments, tests, care and prevention services. Against this background, he noted that in these unprecedented times, communities affected by HIV had demonstrated strong leadership and resilience by supporting those who need antiretroviral treatment, which saw an increase of 9% over the same period. Following their lead, the Global Fund quickly supported essential health innovations such as rolling concurrent HIV and COVID-19 testing programs and adopting multi-month dispensing of life-saving antiretroviral medications. In this regard, through the creation of the ACT-A accelerator, the Global Fund has been the primary channel for providing grant support to low- and middle-income countries for COVID-19 tests, treatments, including oxygen protective equipment and critical elements of health system strengthening. He underscored that the capabilities to prevent, detect and respond to diseases like COVID-19 and future pathogens are essentially the same capabilities needed to fight existing pandemics such as HIV. However, and importantly, he reiterated that there can be no global recovery from the pandemic if some communities and populations are still left behind. As we have learned from the HIV epidemic, pandemics thrive on and exacerbate inequities. He ended his address cautioning that a central part of advancing an effective response lies in addressing structural and social inequality such as stigma, discrimination, and criminalization continue to fuel HIV infections and deaths. If we want to beat HIV, and if we're going to win COVID-19 and want to protect against future pathogens, we must recognize and tackle such inequities.

*'It has taken us a long time to recognize that it is indeed important for us to address underlying inequalities that exacerbate or make people at risk and vulnerable to HIV infection. But we are grateful that at this point, it is the focus of our work, and we realize that it is indeed important for us to address inequalities for us to achieve epidemic control.'*

- *Cindy Kelemi, Executive Director at Botswana Network on Ethics, Law and HIV/AIDS*



Photo: Cindy Kelemi

**Cindy Kelemi** delivered a strong community-focused keynote on the importance of centring human rights-based approaches to remove the inequalities which continue to fuel the HIV pandemic. She noted essential elements of global and domestic response to HIV are contingent on the ability of the communities, people, and groups most affected by HIV to live lives free from stigma, discrimination, and equal protection in the law. These communities need to claim their human rights and achieve equality. Without this, the lack of human rights and state-sanctioned discrimination will hinder public health approaches to reach them. In this regard, a human rights-based approach must address issues related to vulnerability and marginalization, particularly those most affected or infected. She noted that throughout the HIV pandemic, we had seen good examples of what happens when a right-based approach drives the response. In cases where this has happened, there has been a marked reduction in HIV prevalence, and these communities can act as a measure of accountability. She further underscored human rights approaches must not be narrowly conceptualized. They must include sexual reproductive rights, children's rights, human rights literacy and the intersection of law and policy issues. She concluded her remarks were encouraging the HIV community to seek solidarity and build back to a robust community-centred approach to the global HIV response.

The panel discussed was led by **Dianne Stewart** and **Matthew Kavanagh**. They underscored the importance of civil society solidarity and elevated key population groups which was very active in the early days of the HIV epidemic. However, presently, the response has been coopted by national interests are winning out over global solidarity, which they view as unacceptable. Both panellists cautioned that we are repeating history, with many of the deaths in COVID being unavoidable, and we are failing to consider the lesson learnt from the HIV epidemic. Both panellists endorsed a global

call action to urgently revisit the lessons learned in the HIV pandemic and apply those lessons to the present COVID pandemic.

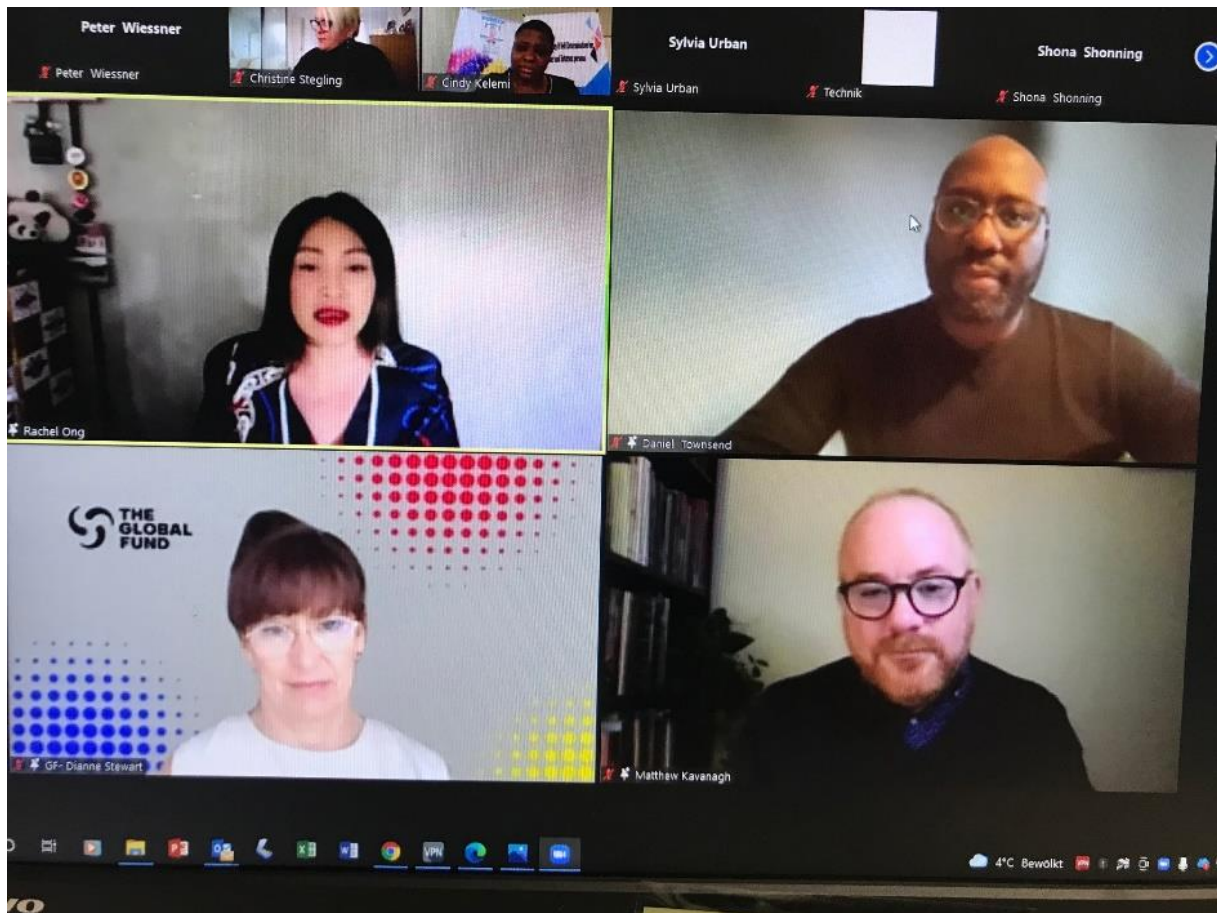


Photo: Screenshot, Rachel Ong, Daniel Townsend, Dianne Stewart and Matthew Kavanagh. Opening Panel

**The author:** Daniel Townsend is the Constituency Focal Point for Developed Country NGO Delegation. He has over 15 years of experience in global health policy and communications advocacy, with significant experience designing policy for populations and communities facing multi-dimensional and intersectional barriers to health.

### More information

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