

10 minutes with Maureen Luba, Africa Region Advocacy Advisor at AIDS Vaccine Advocacy Coalition, Lilongwe, Malawi



FIRST AND FOREMOST, ARE THERE ANY KEY LEADERSHIP MESSAGES YOU WANT TO GET OUT TO OUR READERSHIP?

As we all know, we are dealing with a novel pandemic, and each day brings us new revelations about this novel virus. We also know that the social and economic impact of the pandemic varies across the globe due to several underlying factors, but we are only finding out the extent of this impact as the pandemic unfolds. This dynamic and variable impact demands inclusive decision-making rooted in moral leadership ethics and guided by the reality on the ground. Researchers, policy-makers, funders and programme implementers must first find out what that reality is from the front line and take this into consideration when making decisions. Since a lot remains unknown about this virus, leaders need to also continue investing in education and capacity building of communities to support and enable involvement of the broader community in the COVID-19 response.

TELL US A LITTLE BIT ABOUT YOUR LEADERSHIP ROLE AND HOW IT IS CHANGING AS A RESULT OF THE PANDEMIC?

I have worked in the HIV field for over 10 years helping to lead Civil Society Organisation (CSO)-based efforts. Advocating for a robust HIV response has included holding government and other stakeholders accountable as well as supporting policies based on the best available evidence while highlighting the need for health system strengthening to ensure access to quality HIV treatment for the most marginalised groups. For the past two and half years, I have helped to lead a transnational activist coalition called the Coalition to Build Momentum Power Activism and Solidarity in Africa (COMPASS), which brings together Civil Society Organizations from the Global North and the Global South in a joint effort to shape funding, targets, policies and models to support a rights-based, comprehensive HIV response. Under the umbrella of AVAC, the core function is to prevent HIV infection. My role has been to help COMPASS coalition members/organisations define the local and national level constraints, make connections, share expertise and take the steps that bring about systemic change. Together we have influenced governmental decisions to adopt new evidence based and high

Biography

Maureen Luba is the Africa Region Advocacy Advisor at AIDS Vaccine Advocacy Coalition (AVAC) where she helps lead capacity building efforts around strategy development, data analytics and use for advocacy for Civil Society Organizations in Zimbabwe, Tanzania and Malawi to effectively engage in Global Fund, PEPFAR and national policy decision-making processes. She graduated from the University of Malawi with a Bachelor's Degree in Public Administration. She has more than 10 years of experience working on HIV treatment and prevention and Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) programmes. She is a Women in Global Health LEAD Fellow and a visiting scientist for the Department of Global Health and Population at Harvard University. She also serves as one of the board members for International partnership for microbicides where she continues to advocate for increased access to HIV prevention and SRHR options for young African women. She is also one of the Vaccine Enterprise advisory group members.

impact policies, influenced funding decisions both at global and national levels, and addressed social and structural barriers to accessing HIV services for marginalised groups. COVID-19 is affecting the same communities that we have been working with all along. We are seeing a lot of disruption of HIV services due to COVID-19. Now, I am trying to support these same partners to shift tactics and approaches within a lockdown context, while also adjusting the strategic agenda so we can do everything possible to protect the HIV gains amassed this far as well as managing the intersection between the two pandemics. As a leader, I have had no choice but to quickly adjust and adapt how I collaborate with others to respond to those needs, spending more time talking to all partners to discuss emerging challenges and collectively find strategic and operational solutions. Most of our partners are now teleworking, something not all are used to, so I need to be supportive, flexible and available to minimise disruption in communication. I am passionate about programmes and approaches that meet the needs of women and girls, and the spikes in gender-based violence, unplanned pregnancies, disruptions in HIV prevention and treatment access are devastating—so I am also focused on finding ways to bring short-term relief and long-term change to women's lives. A leader knows she has always got to be learning—so I am absorbing as much as I can about this novel virus so that I am more knowledgeable and can provide informed guidance and technical support to our partners.

WHAT EVENTS IN YOUR PAST EXPERIENCE ARE MOST INFORMING YOUR LEADERSHIP IN THIS PANDEMIC?

The past experiences and lessons from the work in HIV continue to inform the work I do with CSOs. Despite the obvious biological differences between the two pandemics, there is a lot to be leveraged from the response to each. Now, we know that

COVID-19 requires the same skills used in the HIV response to find and trace suspected cases, treat as well as prevent new infections. As with HIV, we are also seeing the emerging need for more funding, new policies, health system strengthening and need for access to quality care for those affected. Community and Civil Society Structures built over the years for the HIV response are now leading the way in advocating for a robust COVID-19 response using pretty much similar strategies and with some modified approaches. As a CSO leader, I am using whatever I have learnt over the past 10 years to inform and help lead CSO efforts in the COVID-19 response.

When the first cases of coronavirus were reported in China, I had just finished my 4 months intensive Global Health Leadership training and mentorship programme at Harvard University (September–December 2019). It is like I was being prepared for this. My learning about leadership and crisis management there applies to what is happening today.

WHAT ARE YOU FINDING THE BIGGEST CHALLENGES?

Dealing with a new pandemic in addition to an already existing one poses its own challenges that are unique to this part of the world. The work we do involves regular meetings with policy-makers, donors and other stakeholders to negotiate for better policies, more funding and stronger health systems. The rapport and communication and sense of a collective has shifted and needed adjustment as the restrictions in travel, gatherings and meetings in many countries mean we need to converse and ‘meet’ virtually. As CSOs, we are doing our best to adjust and adapt, but if this is the new norm, it will take some time for CSOs and communities to fully adjust. As a leader my role is to make sure that everyone gets the support they need to fully adjust. The particular challenge this time is a new one, but the underlying aims have not really changed. Leadership is about accepting responsibility for enabling others to achieve shared purpose in times of uncertainty. Almost every day, this novel pandemic brings a lot of uncertainties and surprises. As a leader, my biggest challenge is to keep the people I am serving, motivated to fight on, to look beyond their differences and find some shared values and common interests.

ANY PARTICULAR SURPRISES?

First of all, I did not expect coronavirus to spread this rapidly across the globe. I had hopes that we would contain it. But at times it feels we are losing the grip. But nonetheless am indebted to all the people that are spending sleepless nights to deal with the pandemic, and making sure that those infected are getting the support they need. Another big surprise for me is the chase for a COVID-19 vaccine and the nationalistic thinking of the rich countries. I wonder what happened to a global response? We need not to leave any nation or community behind. As a community member and leader, I will keep fighting until we all start thinking global. On the other hand, there have been some good surprises too. And one of them is the high-resource commitment not just from donors but from government too. But my only plea is let us not forget about the other epidemics. We need to find a balance and ensure the other responses are thriving too—can we respond so we strengthen capacities irrespective of the pandemic name and nature?

ARE YOU SEEING ANY BEHAVIOURS FROM COLLEAGUES THAT ENCOURAGE OR INSPIRE YOU?

I am who I am today because of my team. I am repeatedly inspired by the growing passion and commitment among

CSOs and communities to fight for equality and access for all. A pandemic like this leaves no place to hide the inequalities. This is what keeps inspiring me to continue fighting for social justice.

HOW ARE YOU MAINTAINING KINDNESS AND COMPASSION?

Working with marginalised communities requires a lot of kindness and compassion. And this is what drew me to the work I do today in the first place. If you do not have that, it is difficult to understand and relate to the challenges of others. It is something one must continuously invest energy, time and resources to. These days I like to spend more time visiting (where possible), talking and listening to the communities’ stories. It helps me not to lose sight of the reality on the ground. Above all, it helps me to stay compassionate and kind and grounded.

ARE THERE ANY READINGS THAT YOU FIND HELPFUL FOR INSPIRATION AND SUPPORT THAT YOU WOULD RECOMMEND TO OTHERS?

There are a number of books but these two are so far the best for me, ‘You are IT, Crisis, Change and How to Lead when it Matters Most’ by Leonard J Marcus *et al* and ‘Not for the Faint of heart’ by Wendy Sherman. They are both leadership books and have really inspired me and changed the way I look at leadership. Being a Christian, I spend as much time as I can on the Christian Fellowship Ministry, and this has been a source of inspiration for me also.

WHAT ARE YOU LOOKING FOR FROM YOUR LEADERS?

To lead with kindness and compassion and for inclusive decision-making. This is what is most important if we are to really learn from these challenges.

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