

HOW UGANDA'S ABC STRATEGY

THE AIDS SCOURGE

As *New Vision* celebrates 40 years of existence, we bring you some of the most outstanding stories that we have covered over the years.

Joseph Batte brings you the story of how the ABC (Abstinence, Being faithful and Condom use) strategy slowed down the spread of HIV/AIDS.

Sarah Nakato, 55, sits quietly in her small clinic on the edge of Kampala city at Kasokoso in Kira municipality, Wakiso district, holding her HIV-negative granddaughter close to her chest.

The child innocently plays with Nakato's necklace unaware of the history that hangs in the room like a shadow. The room is also Nakato's residence.

Nakato lost some of her relatives to HIV, including her son – the father of her granddaughter. But when she begins to speak about the late 1990s, her eyes fill with tears.

"My husband wasted away before my eyes. His body became skin and bones. Painful purple sores covered him and never healed. He coughed blood. He could not eat. He cried in pain every night," Nakato, who tested negative, reminisces.

She is among the few discordant couples – where one partner tests positive and the other negative.

Nakato looks away for a moment, gathering herself.

"We buried him. Then my sister, then my two brothers. Coffins were everywhere.

Every family lost a member. People whispered 'slim' in fear and shame. Families abandoned the sick. Nobody talked about it," she recalls.

What Nakato went through was not rare. It was the reality for hundreds of thousands of Ugandans.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, HIV/AIDS swept across Uganda like a wild fire. By then, national adult HIV prevalence had climbed to about 15%. But in some urban antenatal clinics – places where expectant mothers went for check-ups, the figures were



People commemorating World AIDS Day in 2024 at Bukungu Primary School in Buyende district in 2024. As of December the same year, the number of people living with HIV in Uganda was 1.5 million



A resident having their HIV status checked during a health camp. By the early 2000s, the national HIV prevalence had fallen from over 30% to under 6%

terrifying.

At Nsambya, prevalence among pregnant women hit 30.6% between 1990 and 1993. In Mbarara, it reached 30.7% over the same period. That meant nearly one in three expectant mothers was HIV-positive.

Hospitals were stretched beyond limits. Wards overflowed. Corridors were filled with patients lying on thin mattresses. Young men and women, once strong and full of life, were reduced to skeletons.

Some were covered in Kaposi sarcoma lesions: dark

purple patches spreading across their skin. Others were blinded by opportunistic infections. Many were crippled by constant diarrhoea and tuberculosis. The young died first.

Parents buried sons and daughters in their twenties and thirties. Grandparents found themselves raising babies again – this time, orphaned grandchildren.

Funerals became a weekly ritual in many communities. The sound of dirges and the

sight of fresh graves became painfully normal. And then there was the silence.

Stigma wrapped itself around the disease like a second infection. Patients were hidden in dark back rooms whenever visitors came. Couples denied symptoms.

Some lovers refused to test. Communities whispered in terror. The word "slim" was

spoken quietly, as if saying it aloud would invite death into one's home.

But as all this went on, President Yoweri Museveni's government coined a strategy to sensitise the public about the pandemic. This was the ABC (Abstinence, Being faithful and Condom use) strategy.

This powerful strategy helped Uganda to slow, and then dramatically reduce HIV prevalence in the country.

This turnaround was not by accident. It was not luck. It was a result of deliberate and courageous leadership that chose openness over denial. The Government aggressively rolled out the ABC strategy.

Leaders spoke publicly and frankly about sex, a topic many had long treated as taboo. Church leaders, teachers, local leaders,

radios, televisions and newspapers carried the same message – and *New Vision* was very pivotal.

Slowly, behaviour began to change. By the

early 2000s, the national HIV prevalence had fallen

from over 30% to under 6%. The world took notice. The US studied Uganda's approach and copied elements of its

prevention strategy, as many other countries benchmarked against it.

International health experts pointed to Uganda as proof that behavioural change, backed by strong political will, could reverse even the most devastating epidemic.

Uganda had stared death in the face – in hospital wards, in villages, in whispered conversations – but refused to surrender.

MUSEVENI'S BOLD DECISION

The real wake-up call came in 1986, just months after President Museveni had taken power. Uganda was still recovering from years of war. The new government was trying to rebuild an army, an economy and a broken nation.

Then came disturbing news from abroad. At a meeting of the Non-Aligned Movement, former Cuban leader Fidel Castro pulled Museveni aside for a private conversation. The message was alarming: Out of 60 Ugandan soldiers who had been sent to Cuba for training, 18 had tested HIV-positive.

Museveni would later describe how deeply that news had shaken him. The virus was no longer a distant rumour. It was inside the very army that had just fought its way to power.

If it could weaken the soldiers, what would it do to farmers, teachers, traders and the entire country? The threat was not just medical. It was national. It endangered Uganda's future.

Many leaders at the time chose silence when faced with HIV. Some denied it existed. Others treated it as a shameful secret. Museveni chose a different path.

He declared war on AIDS and called the fight a "patriotic duty". He travelled across the country – to dusty trading centres, crowded rallies, village meetings – speaking openly and directly.

On radio stations, he talked plainly about sex, faithfulness and protection.

"This is something that must be done," he insisted.

Billboards went up with bold messages: "Love carefully." "Zero grazing." Like cattle that graze in one field, instead of roaming everywhere, Ugandans were urged to stay faithful to one partner.

Radio jingles played again and again. Schools introduced HIV education. Community drama groups performed

The ABC strategy did more than lower statistics. It allowed children to grow up with parents.

SLOWED DOWN HIV/AIDS' SPREAD

plays showing families torn apart by AIDS. For the first time in Africa, a sitting head of state was publicly discussing condoms and sexual behaviour without whispering.

The ABC strategy was clear and easy to remember: Abstain – especially young people, until they were mature or married. Be Faithful – stick to one partner. Use Condoms – correctly and consistently when necessary.

Museveni refused to promote just one letter and ignore the others. He pushed all the three. Yet he was also candid about his beliefs. Speaking at the 2004 International AIDS Conference in Bangkok, Thailand, he said: "I look at condoms as an improvisation, not a solution... The principle of condoms is not the ultimate solution."

Still, he allowed and supported their distribution nationwide.

Museveni often framed the message around love and trust.

"You should have optimal relationships based on love and trust instead of institutionalised mistrust, which is what the condom is all about," he said, arguing that fidelity offered deeper protection than plastic alone.

The campaign did not remain in government offices. The entire nation was drawn in. Clerics in churches and mosques preached about faithfulness from the pulpit. Schools implored students to abstain.

Traditional leaders spoke at clan meetings. Organisations like The AIDS Support Organisation (TASO) stepped in to provide counselling and care. Even drama groups carried the message into marketplaces and village squares.

For the first time, people living with HIV started speaking publicly about their status. Testing and counselling centres opened across the country. Slowly, fear began to give way to conversation.

And something remarkable happened. Surveys showed that young people were delaying their first sexual experience. The number of people reporting multiple



Museveni with the former first lady of Zambia, Esther Lungu and the UNAIDS former executive director, Michel Sidibe, after signing a commitment board at the launch of the Presidential Fast Track Initiative to End AIDS in Uganda on June 6, 2017

sexual partners declined.

Among unmarried youth who were sexually active, condom use – once almost unheard of – rose sharply, from nearly zero in 1989 to between 14 and 22% by 1995. It was not perfect. It was not instant. But behaviour was changing.

Uganda had chosen to confront the virus head-on and the country was beginning to see the results.

HUMAN COST AND ROLE OF NEW VISION

The suffering was raw and visible. It was hard to ignore. Patients arrived at clinics looking like living skeletons. Their skin peeled. Their eyes were sunken deep into their faces. Some were too weak to stand, let alone walk. Nurses remember carrying grown men like children from hospital gates into overcrowded wards.

Families watched helplessly as loved ones faded away over months. The symptoms were cruel – constant fever, drenching night sweats, uncontrollable diarrhoea and painful cancers that spread across the skin.

In 1994, one widow told *New Vision*: "My husband's flesh melted away. He begged me to kill him to end the pain."

Those words were not rare. They were the language of a country in agony.

Orphans wandered through trading centres and town streets barefoot and hungry. In many villages, children became heads of households,



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caring for younger siblings after both parents had died.

Funeral processions became part of daily life. The sound of dirges drifting through the air no longer surprised anyone.

Fresh graves dotted hillsides across the country.

In the middle of this storm, *New Vision* made a choice: We decided not to look away. *New Vision's* front pages regularly carried survivor testimonies – real names, real faces, real pain.

Photographs of awareness marches and candlelight vigils became a constant reminder in the newspaper, just like stark

statistics and simple messages about prevention.

There were regular explanatory series about the ABC strategy in simplified language that ordinary Ugandans could understand. Publication of victims was not to shame the sick anymore; it was to educate and break the silence that was feeding stigma.

"Protect yourself – ABC works" became a slogan that spread nationwide, one that *New Vision* pushed into homes and communities. Millions read those pages. Millions heard the message repeated on radio and television discussions.

International observers would later praise Ugandan journalism, specifically *New Vision*, for turning public health reporting into a weapon against the epidemic itself.

WORLD LEARNS FROM UGANDA

As Uganda's numbers began to fall from terrifying peaks of up to 30% in the early 1990s to between 5% and 6% by 2001-2005, the world took notice, one country watched closely – the US.

The then US President, George Walker Bush, often pointed to Uganda as proof that prevention could work. When Museveni visited the US, Bush publicly praised the country's efforts, declaring: "Uganda has shown the world what is possible in preventing the spread of HIV."

In 2003, the US launched the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, popularly known

as PEPFAR. Backed by billions of dollars, the programme drew heavily from Uganda's experience. American officials travelled to Uganda, visiting clinics run by TASO and rural outreach programmes. They studied community mobilisation, counselling models, testing strategies and the balanced ABC message – though debates would later emerge over how much emphasis should be placed on abstinence.

On World AIDS Day (December 1) 2005, Bush said: "This strategy – pioneered by Africans – has proven its effectiveness, and America stands behind the ABC approach to prevention."

Global health agencies also lauded Uganda's leadership. The United Nations programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) repeatedly cited Uganda as an example of political courage.

In 2015, the then UNAIDS executive director, Michel Sidibe, noted: "Under the leadership of President Museveni, Uganda is uniquely positioned to reassert its role and reputation as a success story of the AIDS response in Africa."

In 2017, UNAIDS again said in a statement: "President Museveni showed the world, through pioneering high-level political leadership, that it was possible to reverse the AIDS epidemic."

The praise was not just diplomatic language. The impact could be measured. New HIV infections dropped sharply. Mother-to-child

transmission rates declined. Life expectancy, which had fallen dramatically during the worst years of the epidemic, began to rise again.

By the mid-2000s, antiretroviral treatment was scaling up across the country, building on the strong foundation laid by prevention campaigns.

Persons living with HIV are now living longer and Uganda had moved from being a warning story to becoming a lesson book for the world.

Today, the national HIV prevalence has dropped to 4.9%, down from 5.1%, according to the 2025 national HIV estimates report.

The 2025 report shows that the epidemic still carries a female face because of the 37,000 new HIV infections – about 14,000 were young people aged 15 to 24, with the majority (about 70%) being adolescent girls and young women.

In terms of AIDS-related deaths, in 2024 a total of 20,000 Ugandans succumbed to AIDS-related conditions. As of December 2024, the number of people living with HIV in Uganda was 1.5 million.

Although the fight is not over, one lesson stands firm: when political will comes from the very topmost office, change is possible.

Today, Nakato's granddaughter goes to school healthy and HIV-free, thanks to the prevention of the mother-to-child transmission of HIV/AIDS.

As *New Vision* marks 40 years of telling Uganda's story, our coverage of the ABC strategy remains one of the chapters we look back at with pride.

We did not simply document the horror of the epidemic – the skeletal bodies, the endless funerals, the orphaned children.

We also amplified the solutions. We helped push the message into homes, schools, churches and trading centres.

The ABC strategy did more than lower statistics. It saved mothers and fathers. It kept teachers in classrooms and soldiers in the barracks. It allowed children to grow up with parents. In many ways, it saved the nation's future.