Without the education and socialization that parents and family members provide, children cannot acquire the skills and knowledge they need to become fully productive adult members of society. HIV and AIDS are leaving behind a generation of children being raised by grandparents who, in most cases also need support by virtue of their age.

The rates of infection among women and girls are a cause for deep concern, and when combined with the workload that women take on as well – in caring for AIDS patients, AIDS orphans and their own families – the situation becomes untenable, especially in southern Africa.

The socio-economic status disparity between men and women has a great impact in fuelling the spread of HIV, among women and girls in particular. Cultural norms and early marriages further increase the vulnerability of young girls to infection. Poor communication around sex issues limits their ability to negotiate safer practices and may force women to remain in risky relationships. And socio-economic problems may limit women's access to counselling and treatment. In this kind of set-up, women do not own property or have access to financial resources and are dependent on their husbands, fathers, brothers and sons for support. Without resources, women are susceptible to sexual violence, and the threat of this violence also limits women's ability to protect themselves from HIV and AIDS.

The crisis is far from being over. African governments must commit to strengthening initiatives that increase capacities of individuals, especially women and children, to protect themselves. Empowerment of women should no longer be dealt with under the general heading of ‘Mainstreaming Gender in All Aspects of Development’. Empowerment of women, as well as support for orphans and vulnerable children, must move to the next level of well-targeted, time-bound and well-funded programmes with measurable results.

There is need for increased support of “beyond awareness” initiatives that focus on skills development, community-based health promotion, positive living, gender equity and universal access to prevention, care and treatment.

The ramifications of the AIDS pandemic are multiple and impact negatively on every aspect of development. There is much to be done in Africa to ensure that the response is commensurate to the human and financial challenges that are posed by HIV and AIDS. There is a need for long-term sustained prevention, care and support programmes, and for consistent, predictable and sustained resource provision. There is also a need for the empowerment of women and for change in cultural practices that discriminate against women. Long-term sustainable responses are essential and can only be achieved if all relevant stakeholders work together.