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## AIDS and HIV epidemic

AIDS was identified for the first time in 1981, and HIV, the causative agent of AIDS, was identified and isolated two years later. Not only is this virus known to have fatal clinical consequences due to the damage that it causes to the immune system, HIV also promotes the development of other opportunistic diseases that would otherwise be controlled by the body. These include tuberculosis, some types of skin cancer, pneumonia and recurrent diarrhea.

HIV appears to have spread widely in the late 1970's among men and women with multiple partners, particularly in East and Central Africa, as well as in the male population and addicts of certain urban areas in the Americas, Western Europe, Australia and New Zealand. Today, the virus is spreading in all countries and the majority of cases involve heterosexual individuals. Whether in relative or absolute terms, sub-Saharan Africa is the region of the world most affected by the epidemic. Of the 22 million adults that were affected by HIV by the end of 1996, 14 million of those were from this part of Africa, which accounts for more than 60% of the global total.

AIDS produces complex and far reaching effects on the functioning of African societies. For many reasons, it is impossible and even dangerous to consider HIV exclusively as a public health problem. In affected countries, the epidemic has a devastating impact on the entire social body. Not only does it disrupt the living conditions of individuals and communities, it also undermines the major political, social and economic institutions needed for the development of the countries. It also affects sensitive aspects of social life: the relationship to illness and death, to sexuality, to family and motherhood, or the use of drugs. For these reasons, it is systematically associated with issues related to tradition, morality, social rules and religious norms.

Furthermore, the epidemic is also a political problem. The fight against AIDS is above all a matter of will and commitment by the government. No effective response can be made without strong government action. While everyone agrees in principle to declare AIDS as one of the major priorities of the beginning of the millennium for the future developing countries, in fact many obstacles still singularly reduce the intensity of the epidemic and the public answer.

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