

AIDS economics

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When asked to picture the AIDS epidemic, the ordinary American likely pulls up images of emaciated people on jungle cots or pictures of HIV-infected women contemplating their children's futures as orphans.

The disease can be pictured in additional ways: empty school yards, shuttered shops and empty fields where factory workers could otherwise be earning livelihoods. This second set of impressions, less heart wrenching than the first, describes the broad social and economic consequences of the AIDS tragedy.

"AIDS does not stand alone," Beatrice Were, a Ugandan activist, told students at Keene State College the other day. She was in the state to get people thinking about the relationship of the disease to poverty. Her intended constituency included candidates for the presidency who she hopes will pledge to keep AIDS-relief spending high.

At the base of her campaign, mounted on behalf of Global AIDS Alliance Fund, is a fear that rich nations may feel they've done enough on the disease, which is heavily concentrated in Sub-Saharan Africa. The basis for that concern is that President Bush's extraordinary commitment of many billions of dollars of AIDS relief will eventually run out, while the leaders of the world's other economic powerhouses have ignored his challenge to increase their relief efforts.

Data have long established that AIDS is not solely a health problem. The worst afflicted communities and nations spend reduced time and resources in education and economic development because sick people can neither study nor hold down jobs, and therefore not even dream of improving their lives. There's a downward spiral to the phenomenon, leading to ever mounting dependencies on other nations to help out.

In their own self-interest, nations that can afford to make a difference ought to get to the problem sooner rather than later. That means money for medical care, money for health education, money for schools and money for economic development. A lot of money there. But the cost — in terms of foreign assistance and social instability — will be a whole lot bigger later on if little or nothing is done about the problem now.