
Paul Lehmann,
HIV/AIDS Section, Population Health Division, Department of Health and Aged Care

The 26th Special Session of the General Assembly of the United Nations, held in New York from 25 to 27 June 2001, represents the high water mark of global political commitment to the fight against HIV/AIDS. It was also the first time in its 54-year history that the General Assembly of the United Nations had convened to discuss HIV/AIDS as a public health issue. More than 20 years since the onslaught of the HIV/AIDS pandemic and after 60 million HIV infections, the world community now has a plan of action for combating the pandemic.

In calling for the Special Session, the United Nations’ objective was to secure a global response to HIV/AIDS through the adoption of a Declaration of Commitment. This Declaration of Commitment would then be used to identify priorities for national, regional and international action and as a yardstick for the Joint United Nations Program on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) policy and programs. Importantly, the occasion also served as an opportunity to endorse the Secretary-General’s proposed Global Fund for HIV/AIDS and Health.

Australia’s delegation to the Special Session was lead by the Minister for Health Michael Wooldridge, and included: the Australian Ambassador to the United Nations, Ms Penny Wensley; the Commonwealth Chief Medical Officer, Professor Richard Smallwood; Chair of the Australian National Council on AIDS, Hepatitis C and Related Diseases (ANCAHRD); Mr Chris Puplick; President of the Australian Federation of AIDS Organisations (AFAO), Mr Bill Whittaker; and representatives from the Population Health Division, Department of Health and Aged Care and the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID).

Australia played a crucial role in turning the idea of an agreed statement of commitment on HIV/AIDS into a reality. In the months preceding the Special Session in June, Australia’s Ambassador to the United Nations, Penny Wensley, co-chaired alongside Ambassador Ka of Senegal, a series of formal and informal meetings convened to draft the Declaration of Commitment. Technical assistance for the process was ably provided by Dr Peter Piot, Executive Director of UNAIDS, and his colleagues.

In the view of many seasoned United Nations (UN) observers, the process of agreement on the wording of text in the Declaration proved to be a particularly arduous and complex one. HIV/AIDS has manifested itself differently in many countries, particularly those with strict and widely observed moral codes, open discussion of HIV transmission risk factors, such as those associated with male to male sex, injecting drug use and commercial sex work, was never going to be easy.

Negotiations were further complicated by differences of opinion on issues such as access to HIV/AIDS treatments, and the inevitable nexus between the global response to HIV/AIDS and other global issues such as poverty, under-development, conflict and respect for human rights.

Highlighting the difficulties in reaching agreement on the wording of text was the fact that final agreement was not reached until after the commencement of the Special Session itself, despite a series of preliminary meetings earlier in the year and round-the-clock efforts over the weekend preceding the Session.

As negotiations drew to a close it became clear, however, that responding to HIV/AIDS at the global level provided many more arguments to unite countries than to divide them. The rousing support for the Declaration of Commitment, which was accepted by the General Assembly by acclamation, served to confirm this fact.

In reaching agreement on the Declaration of Commitment, delegations agreed to the inclusion of a number of important provisions. These include: genuine international agreement and commitment to specific targets for prevention; strong language on human rights and the rights of women to protect themselves from HIV infection; and a sound balance between discussion of education/prevention and treatment/care. These advances are reinforced at the commencement of each chapter and are part of the process for follow up and evaluation.

As might be expected with a document agreed to by compromise among 189 nations, the Declaration of Commitment from the Special Session has not been without its critics. While the document breaks new ground in a number of areas, it has been criticised for its lack of specificity in others, particularly in relation to the listing of vulnerable groups. Ultimately, however, to focus on these shortcomings would serve to underrate the significant advances contained in the document.

In his statement to the Special Session, Minister Wooldridge emphasised the importance of countries not losing sight of the objective of the Declaration because of particular concerns, for instance, over the identification of vulnerable groups in the Declaration. Participating in a Ministerial round table discussion, Minister Wooldridge outlined our approach in responding to the disease which is recognised internationally as one of the most successful in the world and many aspects of it are widely emulated. He also emphasised...
our role in developing and financing strategies and pro-
gress to combat the pandemic in the Asia-Pacific region.

As the President of the General Assembly noted during his
closing remarks, the real work has only just begun. This is no
less true for Australia as we continue our efforts to sustain
our domestic response to the pandemic.

The key points of Minister Wooldridge’s statement to the
General Assembly Special Session on HIV/AIDS are sum-
marised below.

- Australia remains well placed to continue its contribution
to arresting the spread of, and minimising the personal,
social and economic impacts of the HIV/AIDS pandemic.
Australia has achieved remarkable success in reducing
transmission of HIV infection through sustained political
consensus on Australia's HIV/AIDS policy and willingness
government to engage and work with affected
and vulnerable communities.

- The Australian Government expressed disappointment
that vulnerable groups - men who have sex with men, sex
workers, injecting drug users, institutional and prison
populations and indigenous people - were not explicitly
named in the Declaration of Commitment. In Australia,
the support and commitment of such groups and their
active involvement and partnership has been the basis of
Australia's national response to HIV/AIDS. AIDS activism
has been directed towards constructive participation in
Australia.

- Promoting prevention is an important part of a comp-
prehensive integrated response which includes all aspects
of infrastructure development, treatment, care and
support.

- Support and encouragement for a robust and inclusive
partnership between a wide range of groups has been a
defining feature of Australia's response to HIV/AIDS. The
full involvement of communities through, amongst
others, civil society organisations including people living
with HIV/AIDS, is also crucial to an international
response.

- Partnership in decision making, policy development and
program implementation continues to ensure that activ-
ities combatting HIV/AIDS are effective and sustainable.

- All countries must be involved in HIV/AIDS prevention
and control efforts, which extend beyond their domestic
situation. Australia's focus for assistance will continue to
the Asia Pacific region. In July 2000, the Australian
Government announced a new A$200 million Global
HIV/AIDS Initiative as a major expansion of Australia's
assistance for international work on HIV/AIDS. In imple-
mencing the Global Initiative, Australia will continue to
support and work collaboratively with UNAIDS and other
UN agencies at global and regional levels.

- At a regional level, Australia supports efforts to increase
political commitment in responding to the pandemic. To
assist these efforts, Australia is hosting the 6th Inter-
national Congress on AIDS in Asia and the Pacific in
Melbourne in October 2001. Australia is inviting Ministers
from 38 countries across the Asia-Pacific region to a
separate but complementary part of the Congress to
consider how to address the broad range of problems
cased by HIV/AIDS, particularly its social and economic
impacts.

Copies of the UN Declaration of Commitment are available
from the UN Website at: http://www.unfoundation.org/.