

BY KAKANDE YASIN

The word “Access” is becoming much pronounced among the youth attending the conference as part of their advocacy to have universal access to drugs in the 16th Aids conference.

The word which has been made part of their five word slogans is being voiced in sessions, interviews with media personnel’s and advocacy with policy makers.

“We are the most vulnerable grouping the world yet we have no income generating projects. We can not afford the exorbitant prices being charged by the pharmaceutical firms to access ARVs,” said Isingoma Patrick a youth delegate in the global village.

Recent figures have highlighted that 30 million people in Africa have been affected by HIV/AIDS, a half of these being youth and over 17 million people have been killed by AIDS in the world's poorest countries (more than the casualties from the wars of the last century). There are now over 11 million AIDS orphans, and this figure is estimated to rise to 20 million by the end of the decade.

A week before the AIDS conference, Bill and Melinda Gates announced \$500 million grant to the Global fund to increase on the treatments and preventive tools against AIDS. On the opening ceremony of the youth conference the foundation announced another 16 grants totalling to \$287 million over five years to establish an international network of HIV vaccine discovery. President Bush \$15 billion over five years to fight AIDs is also in progress until 2008. The Canadian government has also committed \$800million to the present the fight of AIDS in poor countries. However with all the enormous funds going in the project of AIDS only a half a million of people in the third world are on ARV’s medication in Africa according to World Health Organisation statistics last year. WHO had promised to raise the number to 3 million by the end of 2005. Most youth believe the problem lies with patents and are quick to advocate for their discharge.

“The money sounds a lot but meets a number of hurdles like corruption to meet the people it is met to. It is good that generous people are also presidents and if they are committed to stop the pandemic should drop patents of these drugs and make the drugs cheaper and affordable to the common person,” said Kikomeko Peter a delegate at the conference.

“It is not that the world does not have enough resources to provide people with drugs but the problem is lack of political will and a failure in policy that people are still dying of AIDS.”

Peter Piot the executive director of UNAIDS said in his opening speech of the AIDS 2006 conference that: "It is time to deliver because our capacity to respond effectively is far greater than it has been at any time in the 25 years of AIDS."

He also said that governments had committed themselves to universal access of treatment by 2010.

Muwonge Henry an African advocate for universal access explained that years before, when the race was only starting to find a cure or treatment for HIV, research centres and big pharmaceutical companies used the meteoric rates of infection in Africa, portrayed themselves as would-be health saviours of the poor people to win research grants worth millions of dollars.

Massive amounts of cash were sunk into research. It produced triple combination therapies (3CT), treatments which attack the life cycle of the virus at three separate stages

The 3CT therapy included a number of drugs that are required to be taken on a daily basis; such as antibiotics, antiviral and anti-cancer drugs which attempt to slow down the damaging effects, and strengthen the immune system. Hence, it is crucial that the medication remains in the body at all times, thereby making the individual less likely to develop more serious conditions.

"It costs \$10,000 to undergo the treatment program as set out by pharmaceutical companies in Africa, however, the average "yearly" wage in Africa is just \$1,000 for the lucky few," he said.

He added that experts have said in the absence of patents drugs could cost as little as \$200.

African youth are however not hopeless. The Canadian government has promised to start producing the generic drugs and distributing them to Africa at lower costs.

"If we can put a man on the moon, we can solve this issue," said Tony Clement of Canada's Access to Medicines Regime, which, ironically, was designed to boost the Canadian production of generic drugs for poor countries