

**Remarks by U.S. Ambassador Natalie E. Brown
at the Launch of the Legal Environment Assessment for HIV and
AIDS Report in Uganda
Serena Hotel, Victoria Ballroom, Kampala
Friday May 27, 2022, 10:45 a.m. - 12:00 p.m.**

- Minister of Justice and Constitutional Affairs, Hon. Wilson Muruli Mukasa
- Minister of Health, Hon. Jane Ruth Aceng
- Director of Public Prosecution, Her Worship Jane Francis Abodo
- Chair HIV Parliamentary Committee, Hon. Sarah Netalisire
- Chairperson, Uganda AIDS Commission, Dr. Eddie Mukooyo
- Director General, Uganda AIDS Commission, Dr. Nelson Musoba
- Country Director, UNAIDS, Mr. Jotham Mubangizi
- Members of Parliament
- Heads of civil society organizations and the private sector
- Development Partners
- All protocols observed.

It is an honor to be joined today by dignitaries from the Government of Uganda, and leaders of the international and national organizations working with people living with HIV. Together you constitute the beating heart of Uganda's HIV response.

I want to thank the Uganda AIDS Commission for taking the lead and providing guidance to the teams that carried out this assessment. I also extend our gratitude to the Government of Uganda line ministries, members of Parliament, and district local governments. And to the people living with HIV and their caregivers, thank you for sharing your experiences with us.

Uganda has long been considered one of the world's most compelling success stories in combating the spread of HIV. The country's early adoption of a multi-sectoral approach to HIV and AIDS, and its recognition that the epidemic was not only a public health problem but also a complex development challenge, helped reduce HIV infection rates.

Building on this early success, Uganda continues to make significant progress. It is on target to meet 2025 benchmarks and is steadily advancing toward epidemic control.

Here, as in many East and Southern African countries, the gap between achievements to date and the goal of ending the HIV epidemic remains formidable. Across the continent, HIV-related stigma and discrimination persist, exacerbating the vulnerability of key populations and negatively impacting the health and wellbeing of millions of people living with HIV. HIV disproportionately affects the most marginalized and under-served people.

The Legal Environment Assessment for HIV and AIDS in Uganda Report was undertaken by the Government of Uganda with support from USAID to identify the legal and policy impediments that affect equitable provision of treatment services.

While Ugandan laws do not explicitly legislate against or on the basis of gender identity or sexual orientation, the laws which criminalize sex work, sexual relations between people of the same sex, and drug possession reinforce social stigma and fuel harassment of persons living with HIV. They deprive them of their rights to

liberty, physical integrity, freedom of association, and good health. Finally, these laws result in too many people falling through the country's care and treatment safety net.

There is an increasing recognition that the goal of ending AIDS cannot be achieved unless a country invests in approaches that remove legal barriers, shift harmful social and gender norms, and reduce inequalities. Laws and policies based on public health evidence and protection of individual rights are the foundation of an enabling legal environment. These laws and policies have the potential to transform the impact of a country's HIV response.

I would like to share the story of a woman named Murungi who lives in Luzira, a suburb in Kampala. At the tender age of four, her mother died, leaving her HIV positive father to raise her. Murungi's extended family shunned her as she grew up. They denied Murungi's father his inheritance, certain he would soon die. As a child, Murungi was not allowed to play with friends or family. She didn't learn why until she turned 18, when her father revealed her HIV status to her. Murungi learned that she was born HIV positive, but was never told, because of the stigma associated with the disease. The stigma took away her childhood, deprived her of opportunities, and left her as an outcast.

But Murungi decided to chart a different path. She took action and did not let the stigma of her HIV status stop her from living a full life. She found a PEPFAR-supported health facility and soon received care. She participated in the facility's peer support groups

and counseling. The facility staff encouraged her to return to school, and she graduated from high school. Today, she is a youth counselor for the National Forum of People Living with HIV in Uganda. She is happily married, and her baby is HIV negative.

While Murungi's story had a happy ending, there are many other stories like hers that do not. Many Ugandans living with HIV are not able to break away from the stigma. This is why it is so important to implement the recommendations outlined in the Legal Environment Assessment for HIV and AIDS in Uganda Report. Everyone deserves to live their life free of discrimination and stigma.

The report offers an evidence-based framework by which to expand protections to those who routinely encounter discrimination. It provides guidance on implementing and enforcing laws that protect rights, foster gender equality, support civil society and community engagement, and strengthen accountability. These laws advance an environment of tolerance and mutual respect so that even the most vulnerable people in society feel protected.

Key recommendations from the assessment have been presented today. I urge the Government of Uganda, the donor community, and partners to wholeheartedly support the implementation of these recommendations.

In closing, let me emphasize the key principle underlying this assessment and the recommendations that it makes: that recognizing the equal worth and dignity of every person is not only ethical, but it is also critical for ending AIDS in Uganda.