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**Message from Mr Koïchiro Matsuura,
Director-General of UNESCO
on the occasion
of World AIDS Day 2007**

1 December 2007

AIDS, a disease which was not even known a quarter of a century ago, is now the fourth leading cause of death in the world. Today, approximately 40 million people are living with HIV, and in every region of the world, the proportion of women among those who are becoming newly infected with HIV is increasing. Sub-Saharan Africa continues to bear the brunt of this global epidemic, with life expectancy in the hardest hit countries shortened by more than 20 years. And, despite significant efforts by governments, civil society, and international development partners, young people between the ages of 15 and 25 comprise around half of new HIV infections.

AIDS remains a disease of inequality. Gender inequality, driven largely by the highly disadvantaged social and economic status of women compared to men, compounds women's biological vulnerability to HIV. Social inequality, fuelled by stigma and discrimination, prejudice and human rights violations, affects the ability of key populations including injecting drug users, men who have sex with men, and sex workers, to access HIV prevention, treatment and care services. Young people, because of their age and other socio-cultural barriers, are often denied access to the full range of information and services required to prevent HIV infection and to meet their treatment, care and other support needs. Finally, economic inequalities can lead to abuses of power and increased sexual risk-taking, as evidenced by those engaging in transactional sex to procure food or other basic needs for themselves and their children.

This year, World AIDS Day is dedicated to the theme of 'leadership'. It is a theme that recognizes the need for a strategic vision, for focused and sustained action, for empowerment and motivation, and for accountability. It is a theme that should

resonate for all of us – as leadership is required by everyone including governments, development partners, the private sector, civil society, communities and individuals in order to prevent the spread of HIV, to build capacity to respond to the impact of AIDS, and to overcome inequalities that have greatly impeded our response to date.

As we move into the second quarter-century of the AIDS response, leadership will require reflection and actions based on important lessons we have learned on what needs to be done. We understand now the importance of “knowing your epidemic”, including the nature, dynamics and characteristics of the epidemic at the country level, to ensure that strategies are adapted and fit local conditions. We know that HIV prevention is most effective when delivered through a comprehensive programme that addresses not only risk but also vulnerabilities and that builds on synergies between prevention, treatment, care and support. We know that our actions must be informed by evidence and experience on what is known and proven to be effective. Finally, more than ever, we are aware that we cannot be complacent in our efforts, but rather display unwavering determination and a strong will over the long term, drawing on the strengths and contributions of all partners.

These lessons are reflected in UNESCO's work and its revised Strategy for Responding to HIV and AIDS. The revised strategy gives priority to fulfilling UNESCO's responsibilities under the UNAIDS division of labour, including as the lead organization for HIV prevention with young people in educational institutions. UNESCO is also the lead agency of EDUCAIDS, the UNAIDS Global Initiative on Education and HIV & AIDS, which provides an important partnership framework for Member States to move forward in implementing comprehensive education sector responses to HIV and AIDS. At the same time, drawing upon its multisectoral expertise, UNESCO supports and partners with other UNAIDS Cosponsors in areas of intervention that they lead.

At the global level, increased political commitment and leadership on AIDS are greatly enhancing the potential to act. In June 2006, the UN General Assembly adopted a new Political Declaration on HIV and AIDS in which world leaders committed to work together towards the provision of universal access to HIV prevention, treatment, care and support programmes by 2010, an effort strongly supported by recent G8 pledges.

Leadership is also in evidence through the increased financing for AIDS, not only from governments and international bodies, but also from major foundations and philanthropists. But many more resources will be needed urgently if the 2010 target is to be met.

The progress made to date is a tribute to leadership at all levels but, as recent history has demonstrated, we must continue to intensify our efforts, adapt our actions to the epidemiological and social situations on the ground, and mobilize sufficient financial resources for the AIDS response in the time to come. I urge everyone to use the occasion of this year's World AIDS Day to deepen their personal and professional leadership. I pledge UNESCO's firm commitment to fulfilling its role in the global response to HIV and AIDS.

Koïchiro Matsuura