

In the late 1990s, I travelled to Zambia as a journalist to cover a pan African conference on HIV/Aids at the University of Lusaka.

Before attending the conference, I was able to visit many homes throughout the country where a granny or an auntie was looking after up to a dozen children. These were the orphans left behind by a generation of parents who had died because of this cruel epidemic.

Over the next few years, I would return to the country in a voluntary capacity, working with the Catholic radio station's staff. I stayed in a parish in the west of the city and in 2002, the parish priest, Fr Dario, suggested he take me to visit a project set up by his Comboni confrere – an orphanage taking care of street children.

I learned there that there was an epidemic of street children. Those aunties and grannies just couldn't manage the great burden placed on them by HIV/Aids and the streets of the capital city – and other towns throughout the country – were overrun by feral children trying desperately to survive.

Little would change until in 2003 President George H.W. Bush spent billions of dollars sending HIV treatment to poor countries, including Zambia, devastated by AIDS. It was a gamble, but it paid off and gradually, some kind of normality returned to countries in Africa where AIDS had taken hold.

Mother-to-baby transmission of the virus was prevented. Person-to-person transmission was controlled.

Today, around **11%** of Zambia's population is estimated to be living with HIV, with a prevalence of around 8.7 % in the age group 15-49. That's around 1.4 million of the 22.5 million population living with the virus compared with double that number dying of AIDS before George Bush Senior sent his shiploads of HIV treatment.

I have continued to visit the country every year, and I have seen immense changes. I am still involved with that orphanage, but it is poverty that sends the children of single parent families there today, not the wholesale deaths of a generation.

But now the threat of HIV and AIDS looms large once more.

President Donald Trump has cancelled medical aid to Zambia and other African countries. Without the medication that has controlled the virus for so long, we could see a return to those tragic days of the late 1990s and early 2000s. Mother-to-baby transmission could cut short the lives of infants. Person-to-person transmission could lead very quickly to a return to the disastrous days when a generation died. Thousands of Zambia's kids could find themselves existing on Lusaka's streets before the end of this decade.

Already, doctors in the mini hospitals on the outskirts of the capital are running scared. Their fridges are empty and they don't know if their government has been able to stockpile medication before the US medicaid cut came.

Not that the UK is less guilty of adding to the continent's problems. Cuts made to overseas aid by the Starmer government mean that Zambia and other countries in sub-Saharan Africa are facing the decimation of their education and health systems, already under threat. Class sizes in primary schools of over 150 already mean education is rationed to an hour and a half a day and teachers told me how stressed they are.

Matildah Mwandila, a 16-year-old in Grade 12 at St Columba's Secondary School, also used that word 'stressed' as she considered the future for her generation. She is afraid of the return of HIV & AIDS.

Now is not the time to cut overseas aid to provide \$50billion dollars for NATO to spend on nuclear and conventional weapons, but that is the sacrifice we are asking of a continent, of Zambia, of Matildah.

Marian Pallister

Pax Christi Scotland Chair

Chair of ZamScotEd, a Scottish charity supporting education in Zambia