



EMPLOYER/WORKER ANTAGONISM AN HIV/AIDS 'BREEDING GROUND'

A void exists between business and labour around any negotiated strategy to combat HIV/AIDS, with small and medium-sized businesses the least proactive and COSATU 'routinely' ignoring written invitations from big business to jointly address the crisis.

With optimism in civil society, government, labour and the NGO sector at an all-time high following the sanctioning of the ambitious National Strategic Plan (NSP) on HIV/AIDS at the Durban AIDS conference in June, filling this void could prove vital.

Izindaba probed the gap following a sharp rebuttal by Brad Mears, CEO of the South African Business Coalition on HIV/AIDS (SABCOHA), of a COSATU official's charge at the Durban AIDS conference that business was 'slack' in addressing the pandemic.

After admitting that 'none of us are doing enough', and that less than 10% of corporates were SABCOHA members, Mears countered that his members were 'not seeing any HIV/AIDS demands from organised labour in annual negotiations'.

To a hushed penultimate plenary session of the conference, he said there had yet to be discussions on HIV/AIDS between business and labour or between business and government.

Asked to elaborate last month (July), Mears said that within months of being appointed SABCOHA CEO in early 2004, he approached COSATU via the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC), 'to explore whether there was an appetite for bilateral talks'. With no answer forthcoming, he twice wrote to COSATU, first to its president, Zwelinzima Vavi, on 13 October that year and then again in 2006, this time to Vavi and COSATU Chairman, Willie Madisha, requesting 'dialogue on the matter'. Neither letter was acknowledged, he claimed.



Brad Mears, CEO of the South African Business Coalition against AIDS.

Picture: Chris Bateman

Unions 'don't table AIDS demands'

'The experience of our members is that they don't receive lists of demands from unions around HIV/AIDS during negotiations – it doesn't come up. I'm not saying unions are doing nothing, there are some excellent initiatives like the SACTWU one in Gale Street, Durban,' he added.

Mears said it was ironic that unions did not put the case more strongly for workers to be included in health assurance programmes (medical aids), using HIV/AIDS as a central argument, because this would almost certainly receive a favourable response.

'Another irony is that SABCOHA and COSATU get on very well in the new South African National AIDS Council (SANAC), but there is nothing in the way of bilaterals outside this forum.'

Quizzed on why business membership in the high-profile SABCOHA was so low, Mears said it

was a reflection of a more widespread apathy, driven by the overwhelming nature of the pandemic and more particularly in business, fears of being drawn into a high-conflict political arena.

'If you look at the profile of our membership, it tends to be organisations that take a longer-term view when it comes to strategising. These are mining companies, insurance companies, energy organisations, motor manufacturers and banks.' Woolworths is the only retail company to have joined SABCOHA.

SABCOHA's stated mission is to 'empower business in the workplace and beyond to take effective action against HIV/AIDS'. He said when companies questioned what they got in return for their financial donations, his usual response was, 'nothing, you help us achieve our vision'.

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Most companies that had a corporate response to HIV/AIDS were members of SABCOHA and an unprecedented six major corporations had joined since the beginning of the year (Lonmin, Chevron, Nampak, Hollard, Nike and Nedbank).

Corporate response inadequate

'But it's not cutting the mustard, we should have 100 corporates, given the huge need for a comprehensive response, not just 50. There are another 350 major corporates out there, some



of whom have a very narrow view of not doing anything unless it makes a difference to their bottom line,' he added.

The type of company least likely to do anything was a small or medium organisation employing 25 - 30 people who managed to 'get by' if they lost a labourer and who usually measured HIV in terms of absenteeism. This size company also often did not have the internal capacity to implement HIV/AIDS programmes on their own. Micro enterprises, on the other hand, tended to be highly proactive, 'because if the breadwinner gets ill, the business closes'.

Mears said corporates that became most involved in fighting the pandemic tended to have people with personal experience of HIV/AIDS as their leaders. He revealed that Business Unity South Africa (BUSA), a major corporate and business coalition, had agreed to partner SABCOHA in funding a

national road show to promote the new NSP across the country.

The targeted audience would be high-level business executives gathered at a single metropolitan venue where they would be presented with a minimum list of HIV/AIDS workplace best practices plus a 'menu' of additional suggestions.

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Mears first made the road show offer at the Durban HIV/AIDS conference in June but said that with BUSA's help now, the promotion would hopefully 'hit the road before the end of this

year'. He was upbeat about the NSP, saying that in the private sector it was 'already turning from a strategic to a practical document', with two Nedlac NSP meetings under the belt since the Durban conference.

The fundamentally reformed SANAC was also creating a 'new appetite in business', with interest in addressing the HIV/AIDS pandemic currently higher than at any time over the past 3 years. 'SANAC now has a competent, newly elected leadership. The leadership problem has been solved and it's no longer dysfunctional. Its members are highly competent and already highly capacitated, so operational efficiency won't be a problem,' he added.

Repeated attempts to contact COSATU President Zwelinzima Vavi for comment proved unsuccessful.

Chris Bateman