

Grassroots

SPRING 2026



Climate, Health and Social Justice



Stephen Lewis
Foundation

Letter from our Executive Director

In planning this edition of our *Grassroots* newsletter, we wanted to highlight the strategic and practical ways SLF partners are addressing the climate crisis in communities deeply affected by HIV and AIDS.

Sadly, as we were completing the issue, our remarkable co-founder Stephen Lewis passed away. Together with people around the world, we paused to mourn and reflect on his life and legacy.

Stephen's moral courage and indelible commitment to justice shaped the SLF. He believed in the power of grassroots leadership, collective action and hope. His loss is profound, but his vision guides us as vividly as always.

Stephen understood that AIDS was never simply a health crisis. It is a crisis fuelled by systemic inequities, gender injustices, deliberate policies of discrimination, human rights violations and political indifference. Today, climate change adds a new layer of complexity and uncertainty to the global HIV response.

SLF partners across 14 countries in Africa are reporting that climate-related disasters are worsening the impacts of the HIV epidemic. Prolonged droughts and flooding are increasing food insecurity. Extreme weather events are displacing families, disrupting access to clinics and HIV medications and burdening already fragile health care systems. Women and girls, who are disproportionately affected by both HIV and climate instability, continue to carry the heaviest load.

Every day, amid these overlapping crises, our partners continue to lead with courage, determination and innovation. They are

addressing the immediate needs of their communities, and planning for the long term to protect decades of gains made against AIDS. Their work is strengthened through ongoing solidarity with supporters here in Canada.

In honouring Stephen's legacy, we recommit to this work with renewed determination. He taught us that true solidarity is action that is rooted in listening, partnership and our shared humanity.

Thank you for *your* solidarity with us and with the community leaders who continue to champion health, human rights and climate justice for a future free from AIDS.

With gratitude,



Meg French
Executive Director
Stephen Lewis Foundation



Stephen Lewis: A reflection from David Suzuki

From the first time I heard Stephen Lewis speak, I have been in awe of his oratorical ability. My father always told me, "In Canada, you have to be ready to stand up and defend your beliefs and actions," because he felt the Japanese cultural emphasis on "fitting in" was an impediment to success in this country. **Stephen was proof of the power of public speech and for me, a lifelong icon and role model.**

Few Canadians know that before his incredible work with the UN and Africa, Stephen had chaired what I consider one of the most important meetings ever held on climate. Held in Toronto in 1988, it was opened by Prime Minister Brian Mulroney, while Norway's PM, Gro Harlan Brundtland, delivered the keynote address.

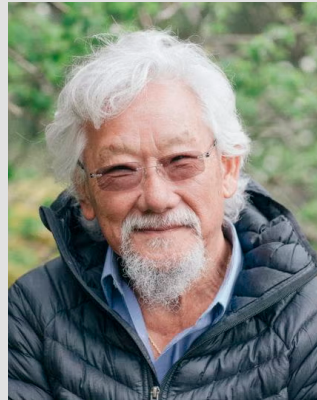
Scientists were certain the planet was warming, so Stephen helped write the final press release that declared global warming was a threat to humanity second only to a global nuclear war and called for a 20% reduction in greenhouse gases by 2005. Had that call been acted on, we would have avoided the catastrophe we now face, saved millions of lives and hundreds of billions of dollars.

When Stephen told me he had cancer and a 15% chance of surviving treatment, I told him about Stephen Jay Gould, the eminent Harvard scientist who had been diagnosed with the deadly asbestos-related disease, mesothelioma. Gould searched the literature and found the steep death curve did not plunge to zero, it was asymptotic, so he tried every medical treatment available and survived for years. I urged Stephen, "Give it all you've got to stay in the 15%." He did and survived for more than seven years.

It was during those last years that I plucked up the courage to ask him to join me for a tour of five Canadian universities to urge students to become activists on climate change. His health wasn't plunging so I hoped it would lift him up to be working for a cause. **No one could match Stephen to inspire and galvanize people to act, and he delivered with fiery oratory, humour and wisdom.** It was one of my most cherished memories working on that campaign with him.



Dr. David Suzuki
David Suzuki Foundation



Clean energy in a changing climate to support healthy communities

In some areas of Uganda, preparing a daily meal is becoming more difficult as climate change affects access to essential resources.

Most households rely on firewood or charcoal for cooking, but as forests shrink and fuel becomes harder to find, families are travelling longer distances or spending more to get it. For households already facing financial strain, this adds to the challenge of meeting basic needs. Families may also be exposed to harmful indoor air pollution, which can cause respiratory illness and suppress immune systems. For people living with HIV, these challenges are compounded.

Taken without food, antiretroviral medicines for HIV can cause nausea and stomach pain, making it difficult to take consistently, which increases the risk that people will not be able to adhere to treatment. Inadequate nutrition can also affect how well the body absorbs the medication, reducing its effectiveness.

Benevolent Integrated Development and Care Foundation (BIDCAF) is working with communities to address these interconnected challenges, including by providing cookstoves. BIDCAF's cookstoves use significantly less fuel and produce far less smoke than traditional cooking methods. They can reduce cooking time by up to 65% and fuel use by 66%.

For many households, the impact is immediate. Families are spending less time and money on fuel, and the air quality in their homes is safer and healthier.

Collecting firewood is also a daily burden that often falls to women and girls. BIDCAF's cookstove initiative frees up their time for other priorities, like income-generating activities and community leadership.

The impact of this work extends beyond the household. By reducing the demand for firewood and charcoal, the cookstoves help ease pressure on local forests and support environmental sustainability.



Photo Credit: Jolly Luballe/BIDCAF/Uganda

BIDCAF contributes to household well-being by providing energy-efficient cookstoves.

BIDCAF goes beyond distribution of these cookstoves. They support local production and training, ensuring community members are directly involved in building and maintaining them. This approach creates additional income opportunities.

The cookstove initiative is part of a broader approach to climate change adaptation. BIDCAF supports reforestation, sustainable natural resource management, and climate education to further strengthen community resilience.

Young people are also actively involved. In school-based Eco-Clubs supported by BIDCAF, students come together to learn about climate change and environmental stewardship. Participants engage in peer discussions and community activities to build knowledge and take action within their schools and communities.

In some schools, Eco-Club participants have gone on to organize environmental clean-up activities independently, extending the impact of the program beyond its original scope.



Before the Eco-Club, I saw climate change as my family's personal struggle when our crops failed. Now I understand it's a chain that connects us all — the pollution from one place creates drought in another. This knowledge transformed my loneliness into solidarity. Today I stand with my peers, not as victims, but as a united front. Our collective responsibility is our collective power.

— Eco-Club student participant

This sense of shared responsibility is central to how BIDCAF works with community members to design and lead their own solutions. By supporting locally driven initiatives, they are helping families respond to immediate challenges while strengthening long-term health and community well-being.

Local leaders and neighbouring communities have expressed interest in adopting similar approaches, reflecting both the practical benefits of the program and community ownership.

With continued support, BIDCAF can expand this work to reach more households. More people living with HIV can have access to the food, safe environments, income and support they need to maintain consistent care as climate pressures continue to grow.

Strengthening food security for people living with HIV

In Thika, Kenya, WEM Integrated Health Services (WEMIHS) has supported people living with or affected by HIV for over 25 years. Over the past decade, climate change has made this work harder.

Traditionally, many of the families in the community have relied on small-scale farming for food and income. Crop losses and failures caused by unpredictable weather and shifting rainfall patterns have led to higher, and sometimes unaffordable, food prices. People living with HIV need nutritious food for treatment to be effective. As a result, the effects of climate change have a direct impact on HIV treatment and health outcomes.

To improve food security and leverage naturally occurring water reservoirs in the region, WEMIHS piloted a community, land-based fish farming project in 2019. They built raised fishponds and designed an aquaponics system that uses wastewater to grow plants and vegetables, which filter and clean the water before it is returned to reservoirs.

The pilot project has grown into a thriving, community-led enterprise. Today, WEMIHS operates a fish hatchery producing 30,000 fish each growth cycle and has trained local families in sustainable fish farming techniques. Some families now produce fish feed, generating a steady income stream and lowering the cost of fish farming for the community. The project has created jobs, and a local supply chain.

An ongoing challenge is the high cost and inconsistency of electricity. Fish farming requires continuous power to operate equipment, and WEMIHS often needs to use generators during frequent outages. They are exploring a shift to solar power to reduce long-term costs and make new activities possible, such as drying fish to extend shelf life and reduce waste.

Through innovation and community collaboration, WEMIHS has reduced the region's dependence on rain-fed crops. By supplying fish in an urban, non-coastal environment, the organization gives access to quality fish as a nutritious and sustainable food source.

For communities affected by HIV, food and income security are an important part of addressing the inequities that continue to drive the epidemic. For people living with HIV, this translates into more power over health and well-being for themselves and their families. Adherence to treatment, which includes adequate nutrition, is an important part of HIV prevention and care. SLF partners like WEMIHS are improving immediate and long-term health outcomes for their communities.



WEMIHS provides training in fish farming, harvesting and preparation for consumption and sale.

Empowerment, education and gender equality in rural Kenya

In Migori County, Kenya, the climate crisis is reshaping daily life. Like many communities where SLF partners work, prolonged droughts and devastating floods are making farming increasingly unreliable and undermining food and income security.

Josephine Auma, Programs Coordinator at **Kared Fod Women Development Programme (KAWODEP)**, shared about how these pressures are deepening existing inequities that fuel the HIV epidemic.

Many families are searching for new ways to support their households. Some are turning to unregulated gold mining, a practice that is depleting local water sources and contaminating water and soil with heavy metals and chemicals.

For women and children, the consequences of climate change and environmental degradation are most profound. Rising costs of food and water and the escalating cost of living are forcing children out of school as families struggle to afford tuition, uniforms and supplies. Due to extreme hardship, some children are also working in mines in hazardous conditions.

Economic instability is also intensifying gender inequality, contributing to increased gender-based violence and new HIV transmissions. At the same time, declining international funding for global health and HIV is limiting access to essential health and social supports.

KAWODEP works with rural communities to address these interconnected challenges through education, advocacy and economic empowerment. Their approach addresses immediate needs while supporting long-term resilience.

By covering tuition and related educational costs, they help keep children in school. Their resource centre provides young people, especially girls, with access to information technology and vocational training, preparing them for safer and more sustainable livelihoods.

KAWODEP supports climate adaptation and food security by providing quality seeds, fertilizer and drip irrigation kits. Community members can now grow vegetables despite increasingly erratic weather conditions.

KAWODEP also connects households to a tree seedling program that provides each family with 25 seedlings. As the trees mature, they become a useful source of timber and fruit for families, and absorb carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, helping to restore local ecosystems.

Lilian*, a widowed mother of six, used KAWODEP's support to transform her family's future. She began growing vegetables, planted seedlings, and earned a stable income through a small business. Over time, Lilian was able to use her savings to build a home that can withstand flooding, reinforced with timber from her own trees.

She was also able to support her eldest child through tertiary education with KAWODEP's help. Today, he works as a civil engineer focused on water systems and is helping his siblings continue their studies.

Reflecting on the tangible impact of KAWODEP's programs, Josephine shared, "It was a small initiative that most would have dismissed, not seeing the potential, and now it has allowed this family to build a house."

The HIV epidemic is fuelled by systemic inequities. Community-led programs that empower women and their families are part of effective, long-term responses to HIV and AIDS.

Today, international funding cuts are placing immense strain on community-led organizations like KAWODEP. Many are being forced to scale back or suspend programs and services, even as demand grows. They are being asked to do more with fewer resources to help navigate climate challenges and uncertainty.

Leaders like Josephine remain determined. "Solidarity and support are motivating. Better we try, than failing to try," she says. "We'll keep trying until we see the change we want."

**Name changed to protect privacy.*

Leave a Legacy

Your legacy has the power to inspire hope for generations to come.

Sometimes, lasting change begins with one conversation. Around the table, family and friends gather together to share meals, stories and their hopes for a better world. One such conversation grew into the Stephen Lewis Foundation — grounded in global solidarity, community leadership and the belief that lasting change begins at the grassroots.

One conversation started it all.

By choosing to leave a gift in your will to the SLF, you can help dismantle inequality, strengthen communities and create a more just future for generations to come.

We invite you to start the conversation with your loved ones — and with us.

Please contact us at
1-888-203-9990 Ext. 0 or
legacy@stephenlewisfoundation.org.



Supporting livelihoods in a changing climate



Photo Credit: Lerato Maduna/South Africa

This grandmother's thriving fruit and vegetable garden, which includes a surplus of bananas, is a powerful reflection of *siyanqoba*, a Zulu word that translates to "we are victorious." Siyanqoba Community Support Group, an SLF partner serving rural areas in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, is helping to empower their community members to build sustainable futures rooted in care and collective strength in the face of climate challenges that affect food production.



Photo Credit: Eve Gilliam/CHRR/Malawi

Eliza Mbedza shows honey harvested through a beekeeping project with the Centre for Human Rights and Rehabilitation (CHRR), an SLF partner in Malawi. Members of this peer support group for women affected by HIV have created successful livelihoods and are supporting their families. Beekeeping, however, is increasingly at risk due to climate change disrupting flowering seasons and access to water, and extreme weather affecting bee health and honey production.

Stephen Lewis knew that the fight against AIDS does not exist in isolation. Climate change, inequality, displacement and access to health care are deeply connected — and people living with HIV are often the first and most severely impacted.

Your donation helps build a future where communities are not only surviving today's challenges, but are prepared for tomorrow's. **Join us in carrying forward a vision rooted in justice, compassion and hope.**



Reflections from Idah Mukuka Nambeya on Stephen Lewis, women in HIV leadership, and a powerful grassroots movement

Celebrating 20 years of the Grandmothers to Grandmothers Campaign

This year we celebrate the 20th anniversary of the Grandmothers to Grandmothers Campaign, an initiative at the heart of the Stephen Lewis Foundation.

Over two decades, this grandmothers solidarity movement has shown how women's leadership, community organizing and international solidarity lead to safer, healthier and more equitable communities.

Idah Mukuka Nambeya is Senior Advisor to the Grandmothers to Grandmothers Campaign and an HIV and AIDS activist based in Lusaka, Zambia. Idah is a stalwart supporter of community-led organizations across Africa. She first met Stephen Lewis during his tenure as UN Special Envoy for HIV/AIDS in Africa.

Recently, Idah joined us in conversation at our SLF office in Toronto. She generously shared this moving reflection on Stephen's legacy as a champion of grassroots leadership, and the Campaign as a powerful force for social justice:

The first time I met Stephen, he came to Zambia to see the project I was managing at Chelstone Clinic. They told us the UN Envoy was coming. There was a table that was put out for "big" people, and Stephen was that "big" person. As a "community" person, I saw myself to be very small. The minister of health was there. There were doctors and nurses. I sat behind them.

They were giving a report to Stephen, and he was so interested in the peer educator program I was managing, because I had managed to bring men

and women to work *together*. Stephen thought it was a unique project. Everywhere he was going, they were finding that women were at the centre and men were nowhere to be seen. So, he said, "Who has done this?" And my director said, "Oh, it's Idah." And Stephen asked, "Where's Idah?"



Siphiwe Hlophe, Stephen Lewis and Idah Mukuka Nambeya.

I was seated right behind them, and I stood. Stephen congratulated me. I thanked him and I sat again, behind them. Another question came up and Stephen said, "We need Idah to come here so we can ask questions directly." That's when I moved with my chair to go and sit with the important people as a grassroots person who was only mobilizing people living with HIV and AIDS. I went to sit at the table.

In that moment, Stephen planted something in me. I think he gave me the confidence of life, the confidence of leadership, the confidence of not feeling vulnerable. I was the boss for the job I was doing, and I deserved to sit at the front.

Stephen became the UN Envoy at a time when we were swimming in HIV and AIDS stigma. He brought out all his humanity. He showed us that he loved us as human beings and he did not see us as “vulnerable.” He knew we were leaders who could lead our nations, who could protect our communities. He would never want to be praised. He would say, “You should be praised. You are the one who is doing the work.”

These are the values the Stephen Lewis Foundation is built on. It is the grassroots that have protected communities, and the SLF wants to be with them.

I was there when the Grandmothers to Grandmothers Campaign was launched at the International AIDS Conference in Toronto in 2006.

We are talking about an initiative that was started with a lot of passion and a lot of love for what grandmothers were doing. Almost 100 grandmothers were in Toronto [attending] from different African countries.

Twenty years ago, there was an invisibility of grandmothers during the HIV and AIDS epidemic. It was *my* generation dying. Some grandchildren were being born with HIV and some were becoming orphans. But at the end of the day, the person behind the caregiving was the grandmother.

Our governments didn't really foresee that. They talked about people dying in the workforce and children becoming orphans. What was missing was that part of knowing who was doing the caregiving.

Those who were at that AIDS conference were celebrating the resilience of these grandmothers. At the same time, they were also feeling anger and wondering: *Why have the grandmothers been going through all this that they've been going through?*

The activism and the fire started there. And the Canadian grandmothers went flat out to mobilize

resources so they could support the grandmothers in Africa and stand in solidarity with them.

Since then, grandmothers have done a lot of work to increase their visibility. They have become leaders and held national grandmothers gatherings to advocate for their rights. Their grandchildren have gone to school. Some of them have now graduated and are working and helping their families and communities.

We want people to continue to join the Stephen Lewis Foundation and the Grandmothers to Grandmothers Campaign. We still have work to do. We need to use all the tools that we have used in the past to create even more grandmothers groups. This work *has* to continue.

I'm sure wherever Stephen may be, he would rest in peace and in power knowing that he helped create a movement that will continue to save so many lives across Africa — children, women, grandmothers, and women living with HIV like me.



Idah Mukuka Nambeya meeting with a community member at Musasa, an SLF partner in Zimbabwe.

You can be part of a powerful movement by grandmothers and grandmothers around the world, rooted in hope, health and human rights.



campaign@stephenlewisfoundation.org

Join us in collective action for global health



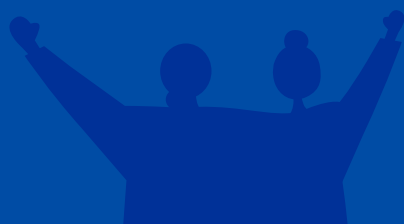
We can also unite the country around a different ethos, an ethos of public health... collectively, you have in your hands the opportunity to set out a narrative for Canada, which will make us a leading country around the human predicament.

— Stephen Lewis at the *BC Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS national summit (June 10, 2025)*

Canadians care about global health and want Canada to lead. With your support, we can make sure Parliament hears this message loud and clear.

Recent cuts to global health funding by the United States, Canada and other funders are devastating HIV and human rights programs worldwide — yet this crisis is barely registering in Ottawa.

Our postcard campaign is changing that. Together, we're sending a clear message: Canada must lead on global health.



Join us!

There are many ways to be involved, including ordering a set of postcards to share with people in your community to sign and send: theslf.org/postcard-order.

Order your postcards today!



**Stephen Lewis
Foundation**

Tel: +1 416-533-9292
Toll-free: 1-888-203-9990
Email: info@stephenlewisfoundation.org
www.stephenlewisfoundation.org

Charitable Registration # 896354008 RR0001
Return undeliverable Canadian addresses to:
260 Spadina Ave · Suite 100
Toronto ON Canada M5T 2E4



Accredited
IMAGINE CANADA