

The following is excerpted from "Economic Interventions for HIV," a speech that Mary Fisher gave June 19, 2007, to the 2007 HIV/AIDS Implementers' Meeting, Kigali, Rwanda.

When you arrived at this conference of HIV/AIDS implementers, you received a special gift: bracelets made by Rwandan and Zambian women artisans. When I designed these bracelets, my intention was to create fine jewelry. But my deeper motivation was to create employment. The reason is clear: Women who share poverty and AIDS can be empowered only by employment. And without empowerment, there is no reason to live.

The bracelet project was done with my friend Willa Shalit and her partner in Rwanda, Dean Ericson, founders of Fair Winds Trading. Willa had been deeply moved by women who'd survived the terror and torture of genocide, and needed now to make a choice: They could go mad with grief, and die, or they could embrace across the violent divide, and live. They chose life. And they celebrated that choice through art by weaving, together, their extraordinary "peace baskets." In service to the women of Rwanda, Willa brought their stories and their baskets to America, and used basket sales to generate employment and income for African suppliers and artists.

Then Willa saw some of my jewelry. And I saw some of her women at work. From that miraculous day grew the bracelet project employing women in both Rwanda and Zambia. When a generous donor purchased two thousand bracelets as gifts for this conference, we were able to keep women in Rwanda and Zambia earning a living wage a bit longer.

I have never been involved in anything that has so raised my hopes and my fears, given me such pride and such panic. This is not a story of simple economics or guaranteed success – and the story is far from over. But let me tell you the story as a woman who represents UNAIDS, and as an artist, and as a woman with AIDS.

I'm honored to be a Special Representative and goodwill ambassador of UNAIDS. The leadership offered by (UNAIDS Executive Director) Dr. Peter Piot and (UNAIDS Deputy Executive Director, Programmes) Michel Sidibe and the joy I have with my sisters in the Global Coalition on Women & AIDS – these are privileges. UNAIDS' support for our training of women in Rwanda and Zambia was critical to our beginnings. The character and wisdom of Elizabeth Mataka (UN Special Envoy for HIV/AIDS in Africa.); the power of PEPFAR (the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief); the friendship of (U.S. Global AIDS Coordinator) Ambassador Mark Dybul – and Mark's passionate devotion to this cause – all inspire me. Having recognized all of these gifts, the struggle remains great.

We know the truth of Nelson Mandela's great proclamation that poverty and inequality rank with "slavery and apartheid as social evils." And AIDS within poverty is the AIDS we know best.

"Millions of people," he reminded us, "remain imprisoned, enslaved...trapped in the prison of poverty.... Overcoming poverty is not a gesture of charity, it is an act of

justice,” and the first step toward economic freedom, says Mandela, is “ensuring trade justice.” I agree. The key to freedom is trade, not aid.

I was in the U.S. earlier this year when an email arrived from Radegonde Ndejuru. She leads PACFA, Rwandan First Lady Jeannette Kagame’s model program for women and families living with AIDS. Women from PACFA were recruited and trained to create bracelets in Rwanda. The previous week, Radegonde wrote, the women had sent her to thank the World Food Program for their previous support, and tell them their food wouldn’t be needed any longer. They were earning income now and the World Food Program should – to quote them – “give their food to a more needy group.” The World Food Program officer said that, to the best of her knowledge, this had never happened before, any where. But history can be rewritten, aid *recipients* can become aid *providers*, when employment is married to fair trade. We’ve seen it.

So what do I fear? I fear that we may put women to work sporadically but not consistently. I worry that we’ll not keep them working and proud, feeding their families and clothing their children, motivated to hope and to live. The record of income-generating projects of this type is spotty, at best, and we have no right to raise hopes only to dash them. Single economic interventions are not enough; what’s needed is *sustainable* interventions – businesses that can succeed year after year after year.

As the West colonized Africa and other great cultures, the West depreciated the great art of those we colonized. Where economic interventions are based on indigenous art, we must overcome the stereotype that African products are inferior, because they are not. We need products of great quality, and we can have them, to support prices high enough to give women a livable wage. First, we need to defeat the myth of “cheap crafts.”

To achieve Mandela’s vision of freedom through trade justice, we’ll need to challenge old models of government aid, philanthropic grants and missionary zeal. These models all assume that donors infuse indigenous cultures with money and know-how and, after a few years, indigenous businesses will grow strong and independent. Then folks from donor agencies or nations can go home. Some times this model works. But not often.

The secret to sustainability – to ending my fears and keeping my women working – is a different model, a sustainable model, a Partnership Model. This model assumes that Africa and donor nations are equally important to one another, that we share a single globe and are, like it or not, co-dependent. Partnership has no room for paternalism.

This model sees communities of poverty also as communities of potential. The Western partner first assures sale of a product and only then comes to Africa to produce it. In short, we bring the market to Africa rather than bringing Africa to the market. There is no other way to assure that goods produced will be goods sold – and for a fair price.

And sustainability demands no timeline for separation, no “going home.” Ten years from now, or 20 – if I am still alive, I will still be designing jewelry, still seeing it produced by

my business-partner-sisters. A sustainable model is built on continued relationships, not the illusion of independence.

When global corporations are willing to emulate this model, they too will become partners in communities where poverty enslaves but employment liberates; they too will accept the challenge of employing a fair share of people with AIDS; they too will see themselves neither as rescuers nor as raiders – but as partners, in for the long haul, creators of justice and sustainability.

I’ve seen the power of economic intervention, and the urgency of building a sustainable model. But I’ve seen something else as well because I, too, am a woman with AIDS.

I would not be here today were it not for Dr. Agnes Binagwaho. We’ll hear from her shortly. Dr. Agnes leads the Rwandan National AIDS Control Commission, serves dozens of global boards and initiatives, and is driven not by professional ambition but by a passion for justice. When I, a woman with AIDS, see Dr. Agnes, I’m moved both to tears and to hope.

And I see you before me – heroes in the global war on AIDS. You lift the weary and carry the orphans, rescue the dying and protect those not yet infected. You’ve shown bravery in the face of criticism, courage in the face of disappointment, compassion in the face of brutal oppression. It is you we celebrate with the gift of a bracelet.

I am a woman with AIDS. After years preparing to die, you’ve kept me alive with miracle drugs. But life without hope, without honor, is not life. It is slavery.

My sisters are weary of charity; we want work. We do not want medications that keep us breathing but enslaved. We want the dignity that comes with proving we matter, the power that accompanies a just wage. Drugs give us the capacity to live, but employment gives us a reason. We are weary of being victims, objects, numbers and even patients. We want to graduate from slavery to partnership, and we want it now.

Until we have created sustainable businesses in every community touched by AIDS, I will wear the bracelet in tribute to you. You are the ones who can redeem our lives from slavery. And I will wear it with this prayer for you, and for the marvelous women who created it: “Grace to you all, and peace.”