



AIDS 2020: Where did the Activism go?

Virtual conference changes the dynamic for advocates and protestors

By Kali Villarosa

The power and influence of the International AIDS Conference long stemmed from its ability to establish a shared platform between government, academic, scientific, and activist voices.

At any given moment, from the opening plenary to poster presentations, the conference could radically transform. A pre-exposure prophylaxis discussion would be diverted by the clamorous cries of sex workers demanding the recognition of their experiences within prevention policy. Such activism proved central for those most affected by the virus to claim their space and find solidarity with similarly situated individuals from around the world.

Despite intercontinental connectivity, the online platform of this year's conference – a consequence of COVID-19 – changed accessibility for those seeking to be heard.

The technological sphere proved out of reach to many grassroots activists and community members most affected by the virus – to the point of blatant divide: Scientists and United Nations officials gathered in the official meeting, [AIDS 2020: Virtual](#), while activists coalesced in a parallel conference, [HIV 2020](#).

The International AIDS Conference's culture of activism developed in 1989 when [300 ACT UP protesters stormed the 5th International AIDS Conference in Montreal](#) to claim space at the heart of the meeting.

Posters declaring “Silence = Death” were held high by demonstrators as they marched into the opening plenary, a previously members-only event. The group called on the government and the scientific community to include people living with HIV/AIDS and their advocates in the design and execution of drug trials, to redirect research to societal need instead of drug company interests, and to voice their obligation to dismantle the discriminatory policies that enhanced the spread of the virus. What resulted was an institutionalization of protest culture, which allowed scientists, government officials, pharmaceutical company representatives, and activists to coexist at subsequent gatherings.



However, as the conference grew to encompass attendees in the tens of thousands, the Global Village – the designated civil society hub of social justice – was mysteriously arranged farther away from the main plenary hall, both literally and figuratively.

This could not be more apparent in the virtual reality of the 2020 conference. What ensued this year was a shift in the entire scope of activism. An air of inaccessibility, hypocrisy, and institutionalized oppression loomed as large organizations, like UNAIDS and GILEAD, called for the centering of health disparities while failing to take full accountability for their own participation in those inequities.

There was little discussion of police brutality or Black Lives Matter, though there were many connections made to the disparities of COVID-19 – but not in pledges from government and scientists to take more intersectional approaches to deal with systemic racism and other oppressions.

Instead, without the drama of die-ins combined with a minimal voice from those most affected by the virus, conference members and organizations alike sidestepped discussing their roles in delaying progress.

The conference platform did create some spaces for activism, designating an “Activist Center” for live chat conversations and maintaining a section for the online Global Village. However, the Global Village required a separate registration, decreasing the likelihood of conference participants engaging in that arena compared to an in-person event. The “Activist Center” rarely reached more than 30 participants at a time despite the thousands of attendees. The chat room conversations centered on small paragraph organizational introductions or prompts by conference facilitators to check out different activist postings and outside events. Such spaces lacked the intimacy and trust of face-to-face conversations. Simultaneously, workshops shifted to presentation models, hindering the extensive participant collaboration.

The screen-based reality of the conference itself emulated the privileges of technological access.

Most disheartening is that such failures come during an already evident moment of reckoning around the global AIDS response and highly publicized institutionalized oppression at large. Last year, UNAIDS warned that their 2020 targets within their 2030 plan to end AIDS, could not be met. COVID-19 made the situation worse. A recent [Global Fund report](#) suggests an increase in AIDS, tuberculosis, and malaria deaths and new infections throughout 2020, which disrupts nearly two decades of progress among worst-hit regions.



Worldwide, health and community systems are overwhelmed, treatment and prevention programs are stalled and resources have been diverted. As the report details, challenges are especially acute in areas affected by natural disasters and militarized conflict as well as for the nearly 80 million forcibly displaced people around the world. Still, as with epidemics, health disparities, and everyday oppressions, those most affected will be defined [key populations](#). In this instance, transgender people, prisoners, people who inject drugs, sex workers, and men who have sex with men. Within these groups in the United States, Blacks and undocumented people will face the brunt of the struggle.

AIDS 2020: Virtual needed to embrace a set of actions defined through [rights based indicators](#) and [intersectional activism](#). That could have sharpened the focus on structural barriers (laws, policies, and government practices) that continue to promote inequity and restrict universal access to treatment, prevention, and care.

Aside from AIDS 2020: Virtual, activists worldwide have assumed their roles amid racial unrest and the COVID-19 global health emergency by taking to the streets and to social media to highlight policy and legal failures. The separate HIV 2020 conference was spurred by what is perceived as the International AIDS Society's continued alienation of those most affected by the virus. Organizers of the activist conference issued a [set of recommendations](#) for the International AIDS Society. Their breakaway served to reclaim the response by centering the voices of people living with HIV/AIDS during this year's meeting and for International AIDS Conferences to come.