



Independent observer
of the Global Fund

AN INTERVIEW WITH ALAN WHITESIDE*

1. Tell our readers about yourself and your background

I was born in Kenya, seven years before Independence. My family moved to Swaziland (now Eswatini) in 1961, where I was lucky enough to grow up. What a fantastic country! Swaziland had a multi-racial, harmonious society: I went to Waterford Kamhlaba College and my peer group comprised all races and all religions. The King added the name 'Kamhlaba' in 1967, which means 'small world'. Waterford was set up as an inclusive educational establishment at a time when apartheid was destroying so many lives in South Africa. We were idealistic, were taught to be and do our best, and always strive for equity and justice. It was a huge influence on my formative years.

After A-levels, my dad offered me a choice of university in South Africa or the UK (I fully acknowledge how privileged I was to have the choice). South Africa was becoming increasingly repressive. I knew if I went there, as a young white man I would probably be conscripted into the national defence force to defend the indefensible. So, I chose to go to the University of East Anglia, in Norwich, England, where I did my BA and an MA in Development Economics.

2. But you returned to southern Africa, didn't you?

I was fortunate enough to be awarded an ODI ([Overseas Fellowship Institute](#)) Fellowship which placed me in Botswana working as an economist in the Ministry of Finance and Development Planning. I was there for two and a half years and then moved to the Economic Research Unit at the University of Natal in Durban, South Africa.

Apartheid was still rampant and it was a tough time in the country's history. However, this changed in 1994; I voted for the first time and then took South African citizenship.

So, Mandela came into power and the government started what it called '[rationalization](#)' of universities. This meant that previously segregated universities for whites, blacks, Indians, coloureds, etc. were being merged; thus, KwaZulu merged with Natal, and became the University of KwaZulu-Natal. I won't go into all of that here, but for anyone who is interested in [apartheid and further education](#) in South Africa, the article in the link is worth reading.

3. Most people know you for your work in HIV/AIDS: how did you become involved in this?

In 1987, I wrote my first article on HIV, and what it might mean to South Africa. This was a completely new field: little was known about HIV and, certainly, no one then had given much thought to the economic consequences of the virus. In 1990, I was asked to write a position paper on economics and HIV. I then began working almost exclusively on the economic, cultural and social causes and consequences of HIV. This led to the establishment of the university's [Health Economics and AIDS Research Division](#) (HEARD), with me as Executive Director, in 1998.

Along the way I established a subscription newsletter 'AIDS Analysis Africa (Southern African Edition)', and this eventually had an Africa-wide and an Asian Edition. The last two were published in partnership with 'Africa Analysis', and to my delight, our office was on Fleet Street. And in 2003 I was appointed a Commissioner for [the Commission on HIV/AIDS and Governance in Africa](#) convened by the then UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan and served as such until 2006.

HEARD was an amazing experience. We had support from a range of donors who funded posts to build up the team. In 2006 a cohort of major donors (the UK Department for International Development, the Dutch, Irish Aid, the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, and UNAIDS) told us to present them with a proposal for core funding. They initially gave us a generous amount of money under a 'Joint Financing Arrangement'.

We ramped up HEARD, expanded our program, and brought in a lot of partners. We became well-known for our multi-disciplinary policy, research, and advocacy work. We made the economic case for addressing some of Africa's most enduring health conditions including HIV and AIDS, gender vulnerabilities, sexual and reproductive health and rights, adolescent health, and intimate partner violence, and health disabilities.

4. And where does the Global Fund come in?

I had been an advisor on the UNAIDS/World Bank [HIV Economics Reference Group](#) (ERG). We worked with the Global Fund, UNAIDS, and the World Bank, as well as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the US President's Emergency Fund for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR). In 2012, the Global Fund asked three groups, of which one was HEARD, to do an analysis on the ideal split between the three diseases.

Around the same time, I met Aidsplan's founder, Bernard Rivers, who told me about the independent watchdog that he had set up to hold the Global Fund accountable for the enormous public confidence and taxpayers' money that had been channeled into the organization. He persuaded me to join the Board. The rest, as they say, is history!

5. What attracted you to joining Aidsplan?

I liked the idea of a watchdog, which in my book is a 'Good Thing'. I liked the organization's ethos, and the people working with the organization? these were my criteria for becoming involved. And after Bernard

left, we had a couple of Executive Directors until Ida stepped in, and really cemented Aidspan's reputation for pushing for Global Fund governance and accountability through robust analysis, research, and publications such as the Global Fund Observer (GFO).

6. My favourite question, as usual – what are you proud of, in terms of Aidspan's achievements in the seven or so years you've been on the Board?

Let me turn that around by saying there are things it hasn't done that I am proud of. For example, we have barely missed an issue of the GFO, even when we had no 'permanent' Senior Editor in charge. What we have done is published consistently, on time, and to high quality; attracted reliable donor funding; and built up a cohort of staff who have the capacity to research and write on issues of the most relevance to the Global Fund and its partners.

But I also have to mention what we could do better. We are weak on regions other than Africa, although that is changing. And Africa does receive over 70% of Global Fund monies so an Afrocentric emphasis is permissible.

7. You've written in GFO about the detrimental impact of COVID-19 (C19) on overseas development assistance and we, Aidspan, are a victim of this, having recently lost a key donor; what do you think we need to do to attract more funding?

We need to be big boys and girls when things go wrong. We and the donors are in the same business and are subject to the same constraints; we must acknowledge that this is an exceptionally difficult time for governments who still want to support the development agenda, equity, helping societies less better off than they are: but we are currently challenged in a way we have never before seen. Let's just get on with what we do best, and I firmly believe that things will improve both in terms of C19 and for our donors.

8. And to finish your life story...?

I left HEARD because I believe there are certain rules that apply to successful innovative leadership: you build something up to be the best it can possibly be, you manage it as well as you can and then, pass the baton before you become bored and stale. For the sake of the organization, it was time for me to move on before I reached my 'use-by' date! So, in 2013, I made sure that the best successor was appointed and in 2014 I left for the new challenge of the university in Canada ([Balsillie School in Waterloo](#), Ontario). In December this year, I will 'retire' to the UK: and, doubtless, new challenges will emerge to keep me busy...

Note from Arlette: I would just like to point out that Alan was appointed an [Officer of the Order of the British Empire](#) (OBE) in the Queen's 2015 New Year Honours for services to science and strategic interventions to curb HIV/AIDS. This is an extremely prestigious award that he was too modest to mention when talking about his life accomplishments.

9. Going forward, for Aidspan?

We have to explore where we fit into this new world, post-COVID; be innovative and nimble. Thanks to the vaccines, we can address C19, unlike other issues such as HIV; it is so much wider than health per se, and questions of equity will still be applicable to the work we do. We should continue to expand to look more broadly at health and continue to be a key player in the field of health equity and health access. We need to look at how C19 has affected the funding landscape, we have to show both donors and our audience that we are relevant; and proactive.

10. And going forward, for you?

I'm writing my memoirs...and I've been pounding the streets of Norwich leafleting for the local Council

elections on behalf of the Lib Dems (Liberal Democrat Party), hence my slogan 'think global – act local!'. I expect there'll be more of both in my future!

Arlette: And maybe you'll finish your flying certificate...

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