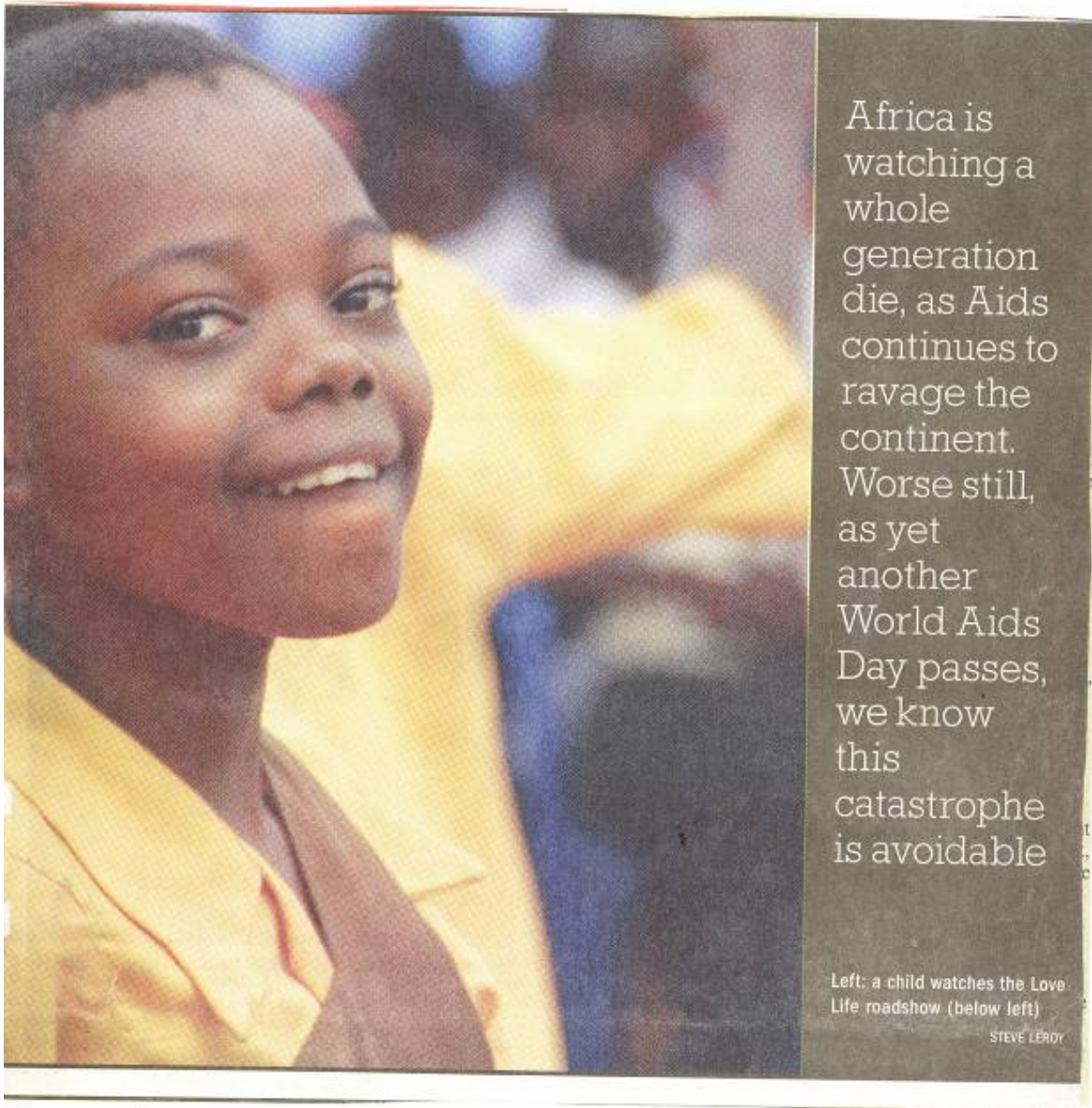


Client	CCAL
Publication	Sunday Business Post
Date	03.12.06

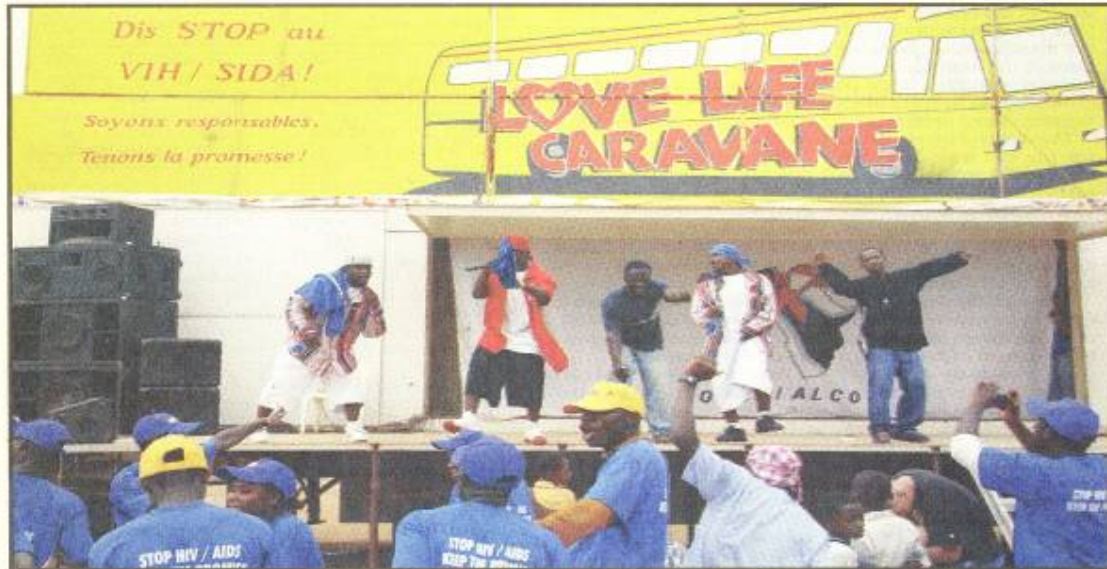




Africa is watching a whole generation die, as Aids continues to ravage the continent. Worse still, as yet another World Aids Day passes, we know this catastrophe is avoidable

Left: a child watches the Love Life roadshow (below left)

STEVE LEROY



INSIDE STORY



**ANDREW LYNCH
IN GHANA**

It is pushing 80 degrees in the sweltering heat of the mid-day African sun, but the big man in front of me cannot stop himself from shivering. "Please write this down," he says. "I used to have a good life in this city, a very good life. But once you get HIV, there is no forgiveness here."

"When my boss found out, I was immediately sacked from my job, and I had no chance to find another one. My wife divorced me and now she will not let me come near my children. I have finally got access to drugs and they are helping me, but I do not expect to live long. The only reason I am here is because I want to tell my story and warn other people."

He turns around and proudly displays the slogan on the back of his T-shirt: "Hate the virus, not the person with it." Before he leaves, he tells me that his name is Lucky. I never get the chance to find out whether or not this is a joke.

We are standing in a dusty public meeting square in one of the poorest parts of Accra, the capital city of Ghana. The air is filled with chatter and music as hundreds of local people leave their homes and shops to take their places on



The Love Life roadshow spreads the message in Abeka La Pass in the Ghanaian capital Accra

STEVE LEROY

rows of cheap plastic seats. An unusual kind of entertainment is about to begin.

The Love Life caravan has been rolling across western Africa for two weeks now, covering five countries and over 2,000 miles on what its media ads describe as "A journey of hope". A convoy of vehicles led by a 60-foot yellow articulated lorry with brash slogans on defeating HIV/Aids, this colourful spectacle is deliberately designed to make people stop, stare and, it is hoped, think.

Wherever the caravan goes, it brings with it a motley group

of performance artists, health experts and United Nations volunteers. They have a deadly serious message for the local people, but they sweeten the pill by delivering it through a raucous open-air cabaret show. The proceedings are anchored throughout by an MC who resembles nothing so much as a more cheerful version of Bob Geldof.

"Take responsibility," he yells repeatedly from the stage. "Keep the promise! Break the silence!"

The Love Life roadshow has

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been advertised heavily here for weeks, featuring endorsements from such celebrity African footballers as Didier Drogba and Michael Essien of Chelsea. It takes the best part of the day to stage and includes hip-hop artists, mimed plays and tribal dances, most of them rough and ready but all performed with astonishing passion and commitment.

In between the acts there are speeches from people with the disease as well as a minister from Ghana's health department. Amidst general hilarity, there are also practical demonstrations on how to correctly use a female contraceptive.

A few yards away to the side, meanwhile, the most important business of all is taking place. Outside the Love Life caravan's portable health centre, a steady queue is forming for voluntary HIV tests.

Although the statistics show that over half of all Aids sufferers in Africa are women, the line is almost exclusively male. Some of them are shamefaced, others do a good impression of looking nonchalant. Quite a few, like Lucky, appear to be shivering.

Imagine walking down any high street in Ireland, looking at the crowds of people and realising that almost a third of them have a death sentence on their heads. This is effectively the situation across huge swathes of Africa, a continent that is suffering from the greatest catastrophe to strike it since the days of slavery.

Everywhere you go here, even in a relatively prosperous country like Ghana, you are confronted with the human landscape of Aids. Factories are struggling to cope with the steady loss of workers while the hospitals are crammed full of dying patients. Orphanages are left to pick up the pieces.

Because a huge stigma still attaches itself to the disease here, many of its victims still suffer alone and in silence. Although governments across the continent are gradually waking up to the scale of the disaster, it is clear that many more millions will die before the Love Life message of abstinence and safe sex begins to take hold.



The journalists here today have been invited by Coca-Cola, a fact that itself requires some explanation. According to anti-globalisation stereotypes, corporations are intent only on draining the Third World of profit and have no concern for the welfare of indigenous populations. In Ghana, at least, that stereotype appears to be dead wrong.

Coca-Cola has been operating in Africa for more than 75 years and is the largest private sector employer in the continent. By the mid-1990s, however, it realised that Aids was taking a terrible toll on both its workers and its customers. It became clear that the prosperity of their business was closely linked to the prosperity of the local people.

Coca-Cola's early responses included giving employees confidential testing, providing free drug therapy to those who turned out to be HIV positive and introducing a code of practice that outlawed discrimination or stigmatisation in the workplace. It soon became clear, however, that these were only stopgap measures.

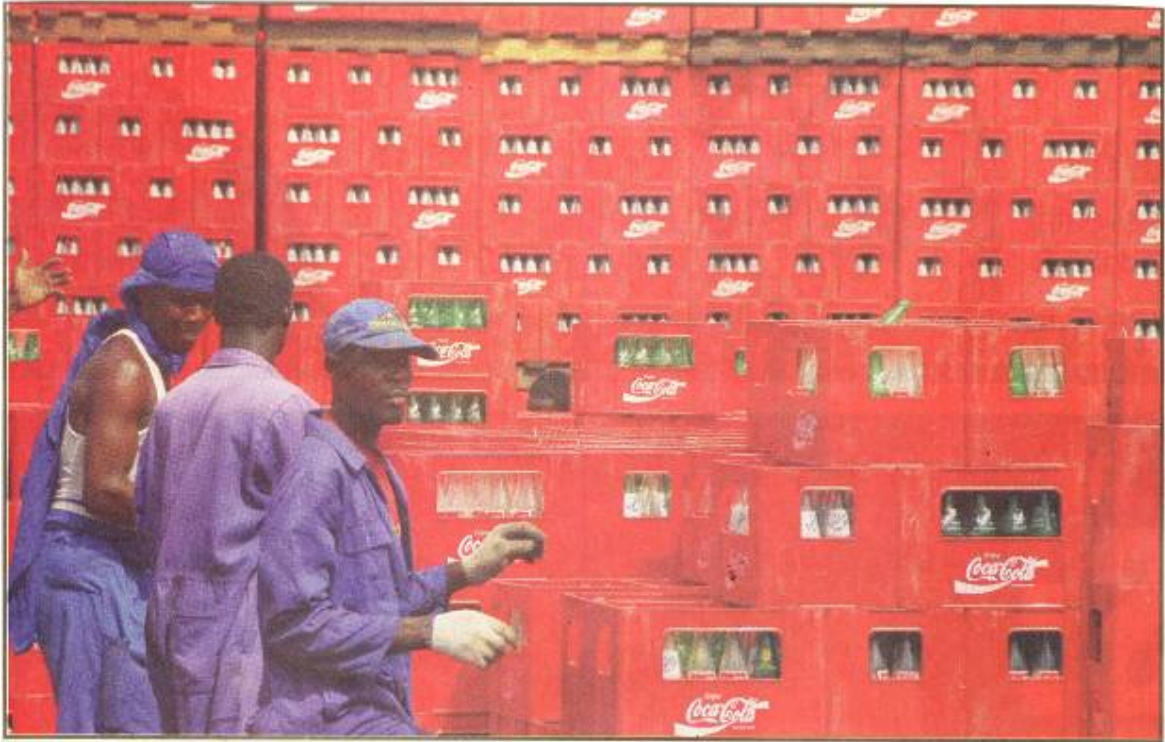
Five years ago, therefore, they established The Coca-Cola Africa Foundation (TCCAF), an organisation that supports local communities as they try to improve their healthcare, education and environment.

The foundation has already invested \$40 million in flagship programmes across Africa, working with NGOs and registered charities to renovate hospitals, buy textbooks for children and provide clean drinking water. And of course, along with the World Bank and UNAIDS, it provides crucial financial backing for the Love Life Caravan tour.

"We don't claim that what we are doing is entirely devoid of self-interest," says Andrew Morrison, senior communications manager of Coca-Cola Africa. "Obviously, we have a stake in maintaining a healthy population here, both to work for us and to consume our products.

"But it's also, quite simply, the right thing to do. In the 21st century, people should not be dying from what is a perfectly preventable disease. We need to embrace our responsibilities towards each other, because these people are as much a part of the human race as you or I.

"You have to distinguish be-



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tween a fact and a problem – a fact is something you can't change, a problem is something you can solve. We see HIV/Aids as very definitely a problem.

"We're often the whipping boys of the anti-globalisation movement," he says with feeling. "Frankly, they should come and see the work we're doing here."

Over at the company's bottling plant in Cobega, meanwhile, the president of Coca-Cola's Africa Group is even more emphatic.

"What does it mean to be a good neighbour?" Alexander Cummings asks rhetorically. "It is not just about not making noise or keeping out of the way. It is about providing a helping hand wherever you can."

"When you help your neighbour's child to learn how to read, or to find a hospital bed, or water they can drink, then you're being a good neighbour. And this is exactly what Coca-Cola in Africa is trying to do."

Fighting Aids, of course, also makes perfect business sense. As Kofi Annan lamented in a speech to the United Nations two years ago, the disease is "uniquely disruptive to economies because it kills people in the prime of their lives. Especially in its early stages, the epidemic tends to strike urban centres, the better educated, the elite in leadership and the most productive members of society. These deaths leech profits out of businesses and economies."

Ghana has been described as "Africa for beginners". A peaceful and well-administered country by regional standards, it is often seen as a model for political and economic reform in the continent.

This was the first place in sub-Saharan Africa where Europeans arrived to trade, first in gold, later in slaves. It was also the first black African nation in the region to achieve independence from a colonial power, in this case Britain. It has been a democracy since 1992 and its elections are largely stable and orderly.

Ghana is certainly a good deal safer than its impoverished, war-torn, or drug-and-corruption-ridden neighbours. Crime is relatively low and the population is well-educated and extremely friendly. Unlike so many former European colonies, there is no subdued antipathy towards white people.

Given the number of old slave forts lining the country's coast, this may seem surprising. But in fact, most of Ghana's tribes, such as the famous Ashanti, profited handsomely from the slave trade.

Accra is a rather ugly city, a

sprawling collection of settlements that have sprung up more or less at random. Everyone appears to be selling something, which is a little confusing as no one seems buying anything. The streets are dominated by shack-like houses that double up as shops, displaying their stock on the pavements as the owners lounge in the oppressive heat.

For the first-time visitor, one of the most difficult tasks is to avoid staring at the women traders who walk around elegantly carrying their wares on their heads. With their incred-

ibly strong backs and postures like ballerinas, they keep their hands free to sell you everything from water containers to mobile phones.

The other striking thing about Ghana is the tangible sense of community spirit. Instead of the despair or depression one might have expected, most of the children seem bright-eyed and cheerful. They look out for their friends as they walk along the streets in their ragged school uniforms, holding hands and pulling each other out of the way of traffic.

In fact, optimism appears to

be a defining African characteristic. Every time a vehicle stops on the crowded streets, dozens of hands tap on the windows and beseechingly implore you to examine their latest merchandise. Walking through the local market becomes a masterclass in the art of avoiding eye contact and developing sudden deafness.

The vitality of the place is inspiring and would be even more so if it were not for one rather disturbing feature. Every couple of minutes, your eyes are drawn to the huge billboards warning in suitably apocalyptic tones about the horrors of HIV/Aids.

Although the death rate in Ghana is far smaller than some of its neighbours, it is still in similar danger of becoming a country made up of the very old and the very young. A whole generation in between is under threat. The tragic phenomenon of child-headed households is becoming increasingly common, as young children grapple with the problems of caring for the rem-



The Coca-Cola Africa Foundation teaches people about Aids

STEVE LEROY



AIDS IN AFRICA

A quarter of a century ago, American doctors started to become deeply concerned about a mysterious virus emerging from the bathhouses of San Francisco. Covering young gay men in purple lesions, it appeared to lead to a swift but painful death.

Within a couple of years, Aids had killed some of the biggest names in the American entertainment world and the media warned of a heterosexual epidemic that would cost millions of lives.

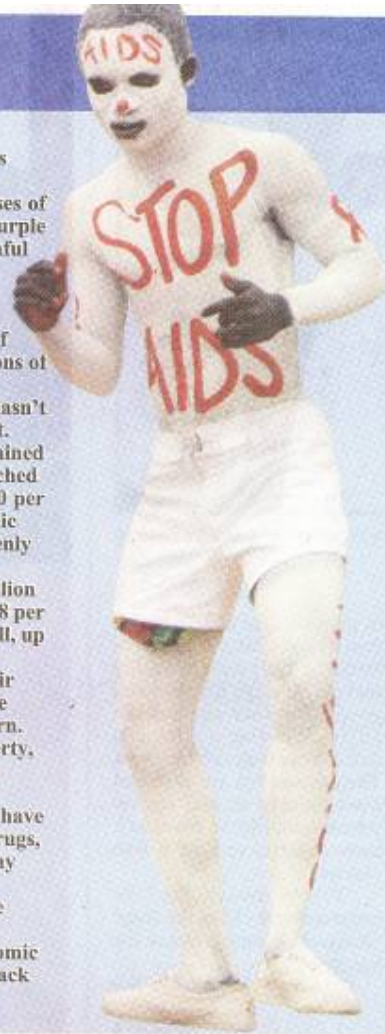
This is exactly what has happened. It just hasn't happened where the doctors were expecting it.

While Aids fatalities in the West have remained relatively small, the disease in Africa has reached apocalyptic proportions. In fact, more than 80 per cent of the 35 million deaths from the epidemic have occurred in what is often rather mistakenly described as the 'Dark Continent'.

According to UNAIDS, an estimated 30 million people in sub-Saharan Africa have HIV, and 58 per cent of these are women. Most worryingly of all, up to two-thirds of these are probably blissfully unaware of the deadly virus they carry in their blood. These people hold a deathly grip on the future of generations of Africans yet to be born.

The problem has been exacerbated by poverty, illiteracy, weak educational and public health systems and the low social status of women. Although some international drugs companies have agreed to slash the prices of their anti-HIV drugs, they are still far too expensive for all but a tiny handful of Africans. And without a proper distribution system, drugs alone cannot be the whole answer.

Quite apart from the human cost, the economic consequences of this plague is likely to hold back the development of Africa for decades.



nants of the family once both parents are deceased.

And yet, the United Nation officials accompanying the Love Life caravan appear to be anything but pessimistic.

"There are a few important things to keep in mind when you look at the HIV problem," says Dr Naamara, a country coordinator for UNAIDS. "Firstly, no matter how prosperous we are, we cannot live in a glass cage away from the wretched poor of the world. What happens in Africa will, sooner or later, affect what goes on in Ireland or any other country.

"Secondly, we are winning the battle to gain the attention of the politicians whose support we need. A few years ago, many of them didn't want to know. Now they are listening to us, and our job is to make sure that the scale of the response matches the scale of the emergency.

"Finally, we should never forget that science is ultimately on our side. There is now a drug that stops the transmission of Aids from a woman to her child, and it costs nothing. And sooner or later, we are confident that we will find a vaccine.

"But we have to remember that this is not just a public health issue. It requires a holistic approach, educating people and teaching them how to live good lives. We are still dealing with men who think it's acceptable to force women to have sex, who think they are safe if they take a shower afterwards, all this nonsense. That is what we are fighting against."



Patriotic readers will be glad to hear that any mention of Ireland provokes nothing but positive reactions from the people of Ghana. Many of them seem to have come across at least one Irish person on their travels (Dr Naamara eagerly asked me if I knew his old obstetrician, Dr Daly).

They have mostly heard of Roy Keane, a man whose fighting qualities they much admire. And of course they are uniformly familiar with a certain Irish rock star who, for all his irritating pretensions, displays a far greater understanding of Africa's problems than most of his critics ever will.

"When the history of our time is written," said Bono last year, "there will probably be three things that come out of it: the internet, this war against terror and the fact that an entire continent burst into flames while we all stood around with watering cans.

"You cannot ignore the Aids emergency – if we do, it will be at our peril, economically and in terms of stability. This problem will come home to visit us."

Back at the Love Life caravan, the show has been going for over six hours, but shows no sign of winding down. UN workers wander around the crowd, distributing gifts of baseball caps, key-holders and, above all, condoms. On stage, a local singer called Castro performs a vigorous hip-hop number that culminates in some of the event's by now deeply familiar slogans: "Take responsibility! Keep the promise! Break the silence!"

And then, even louder and more urgently: "We can beat this! We can beat this!"

And that gets the biggest cheer of all.

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