Address to Vice Chancellors of India on AIDS

By
James D. Wolfensohn
President
The World Bank Group
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Mr. Wolfensohn addressed the gathering via videotape

Mr. President, my friend Chandrababu Naidu, Vice Chancellors, ladies and gentlemen. It is a great pleasure always to be involved in anything to do with India, and my only regret is that I cannot physically be with you today to discuss a subject that deals with the youth of your country.

One can not but imagine a vivid future for India based on the quality of young people, and their hopes and their aspirations have significantly been fulfilled already. But one of the great challenges which faces your country is the issue of AIDS which has been introduced and which has taken hold in a way that must give you pause and must give you concern. With numbers in excess of 5 million cases and a significant increase each year, no vice chancellor can think of his work without thinking about AIDS.

Worldwide, the target group for AIDS has shown that 50% of those who contract AIDS are in the age groups of people of universities and colleges. And so it is that in India, your work becomes exceedingly important as you lead the fight against AIDS and you lead the environment in which AIDS sufferers are received.

We have been active in your country since 1991, and I well remember coming there in 1996 to review the progress of our first $84 million loan for AIDS. It was not very much spent and I remember speaking to members of the government, to young people, and on television about the challenge that this epidemic poses to you. Again in 1999, we were able to give you a loan for $191 million to the government of India which was matched by some $30 million additional by the government to give resources to fight this epidemic. And so the money is there to assist in the fight.

But the reason I am keen to talk to you today is because leadership at the level of the Vice Chancellor becomes crucially important. And this is not just some whimsical opinion, this is something that I have seen in many of the 60 plus countries with whom we work around the world. You have a single responsibility and a difficult one. It is to talk openly about issues of AIDS, about issues of sexuality, about use of condoms, about the prevention of this disease.
I know how difficult that was for me to talk about when I started in this business, But Mr. President and Vice Chancellors, this is not an option. This is your responsibility for the lives of the people who come to your universities. You must show the leadership, you must get over any concerns that you have about talking about these subjects, and you must address the students to indicate to them the dangers of the disease to deal with the issues of prevention, and for those that have been taken by the disease to deal in an open and equitable way with the sufferers who are getting treatment.

You will need to embrace the sufferers. You will need to remove the stigma. You will need to open the debate. You will need to address the challenges and the dangers because you as leaders of academic institutions have a profound influence and you will set the tone which will allow young people to recognize that avoiding AIDS is possible, that it is a terrible disease, but for those who have been subject to it, that they can receive equitable and fair treatment. This is a tough role but you are on the firing line in relation to this issue because your graduates also will convey their messages when they become teachers, when they train teachers, when they pass the message down to high schools and primary schools and when they interface with their communities. You are community leaders, you have a huge responsibility.

We in the World Bank look forward to working with you and I can only say to you that your mission is not an option, it’s a questions of life and death of the students that come to your institutions. You can truly make a difference and I very much welcome this opportunity.