

ment for access to medication and therapy for people living with HIV/AIDS in South Africa and around the world. Building on the lessons of the US activist group AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP), TAC took the stigma of HIV/AIDS head on, shifting debate about the disease from deviance to one of human rights and access to treatment.

In public demonstrations in the early 2000s, both HIV-positive and HIV-negative members of the organization wore t-shirts with the words “HIV POSITIVE” to increase visibility for people with HIV/AIDS and reduce social isolation among those with the disease in South Africa. Anti-apartheid icon and international human rights hero Nelson Mandela, leader of the South African anti-apartheid movement and former president, wore an “HIV POSITIVE” t-shirt as a symbol of the need to expand public access to HIV treatment. Mandela’s advocacy for the group also helped solidify the links between the anti-apartheid struggle and the campaign for treatment access as human rights movements. Since access to treatment for people with HIV/AIDS was only narrowly available to South Africans, Achmont drew international headlines for refusing the medication until available to everyone. In doing so, Achmont put his own health at risk to make a larger point about what he called medical apartheid in South Africa. “Making health care more accessible to South Africa’s poor is now a constitutional duty facing the government,” a TAC press release stated in 2001. He claimed that the South African constitution stipulated that: “Everyone has the right to have access to health care services. The state has a constitutional duty to progressively improve health care access for everyone.” Yet the government was not TAC’s only target.

When the South African government finally responded to activist pressure and focused on treatment for the masses, the policy shift was at odds with multinational pharmaceutical companies. When the South African government sought to import generic AIDS drugs from abroad, the administration attracted the ire of the Pharmaceutical Manufacturers’ Association (PMA) of the US and pharmaceutical companies worldwide, who threatened to sue for patent infringement. TAC activists publicly dissented and joined with the global justice movement, engaging in solidarity protests throughout the world. In different demonstrations, protesters chanted such

Treatment Action Campaign (TAC)

Benjamin Shepard

Organized by HIV-positive South African activist Zachie Achmont in 1998, the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) helped the international move-

slogans as: “AIDS Crimes Against Humanity, from Botswana to the Bronx,” “DEMAND affordable AIDS Drugs for Africa,” and “Drug Company Greed Kills.” The PMA dropped the suit in April 2001, after world protest the previous month. By 2003, TAC successfully pushed the South African government to back a plan to distribute and expand access to anti-retroviral medications for people with HIV/AIDS. By 2005, TAC was already considered among the most innovative and effective social movement groups in the first decade of the twenty-first century.

SEE ALSO: ACT UP; Anti-Apartheid Movement, South Africa; Lesbian, Gay, Transsexual, Bisexual Movements; Mandela, Nelson (b. 1918)

References and Suggested Readings

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