

Providing Aid in Africa

An investment banker becomes a public health advocate

When Robert Ahomka-Lindsay began his banking career in 1990, he never expected to become a leader in AIDS advocacy for one of the world's largest corporations. But after just over three years as vice president of public affairs and communications for Coca-Cola Africa, he has helped build an extensive program to help combat the AIDS epidemic threatening the African continent. "I am a banker trying to understand AIDS," said Ahomka-Lindsay, 38, a native of Ghana. "It has been a real eye opener for me." While earning his degree through the GSB's Executive M.B.A. Program in 2000, he did project finance and private equity work for CDC Capital Partners in the United Kingdom, specializing in large municipal projects. Wanting to expand what he learned in Europe and apply it to an emerging market, he focused on Africa. "I was arranging financing for a flower plantation in Kenya to build shopping centers in Zambia," he said.

In 2000, he joined Coca-Cola Africa, the continent's largest private-sector employer. In 2001, the firm launched the Coca-Cola Africa Foundation, a nonprofit philanthropic arm that partnered with UNAIDS and local nongovernmental organizations to bring Coca-Cola's local resources, marketing expertise, and local community knowledge to battle HIV. Africa is home to more than two-thirds of the 40 million people who have HIV/AIDS, he said.

"Coca-Cola has been a part of Africa's everyday life since the 1930s. We have no choice but to be a part of the AIDS effort. Marketing is very important. We work with local partners to bring to bear locally based programs, with better messages to address change for the ultimate goal of fewer people getting the disease year after year," he said.

From providing billboards to recording radio commercials, Coca-Cola Africa has tailored programs for individual countries, collaborating with local partners.

In Ethiopia, the company worked with Save the Children USA. In Nigeria, Coca-Cola is creating an HIV/AIDS youth campaign with UNICEF. In Zambia, the company collaborated with the Family Health Trust to distribute educational materials to schools, reaching more than 110,000 young people.

In addition to marketing expertise, Coca-Cola Africa provides an unrivaled distribution network, he said. "Getting from A to B in Africa is very difficult. We have trucks, people, and an extensive infrastructure. And Coca-Cola is already in every country except for Libya."

The company also educates its own employees, as well as those at its bottling partners throughout Africa. The HIV/AIDS Workplace Program provides workers and their spouses and children with confidential testing, counseling, and medical coverage, including antiretroviral drugs.

The good work sometimes sparks controversy, and as company spokesman, Ahomka-Lindsay often finds himself in the midst of a debate. "There are so many views and different opinions about AIDS, and there is no manual to go to for guidance," he said. "I don't pretend to be an expert on health, but I think what we are doing is right even though not everyone always agrees with us."

Coca-Cola collaborates with other corporations fighting AIDS in Africa, including MTV, Anglo American Platinum Corporation, De Beers, and DaimlerChrysler. "We have to work together. Business can only do its part by working in partnership with each other and the local government," he said.

Ahomka-Lindsay's job involves weekly travel from his home in England to either Africa or the United States, but he said the effort is worthwhile. "Knowing that your company is as committed as you are and meeting people from across the continent to spread such a positive message in such a positive manner—it has been very rewarding."—Amy Colton

