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PROGRAMME COORDINATING BOARD

Ad hoc thematic meeting

Nairobi, 16-18 November 1997

Provisional agenda item 2(a)

SUPPORTING NATIONAL STRATEGIC PLANNING FOR HIV/AIDS

Executive summary

Until now, the social, cultural and economic circumstances which dictate the shape of the HIV epidemic and its impact in a given country have often been ignored or side-lined in planning for HIV. UNAIDS is promoting a more strategic approach driven by national governments, resulting in priority-focused plans which are realistic and practical.

Effective government-led strategic planning should involve all sectors of government, society, and international partners. An inclusive planning process is a useful tool for mobilizing support and resources and building partnerships across society. In implementing these plans, each social sector contributes what it is best at, making for an efficient use of resources.

Strategic planning focuses action on national priorities and emphasizes finding resources within the country. This requires a change in the approach historically taken by national governments – who have often concentrated their search for resources externally – and by international contributors, who have sometimes sought to direct the response with little regard for country-specific circumstances. The UN system can play a pivotal role in helping change this dynamic.

The skills needed to plan strategically have rarely been applied to the field of HIV. Capacity is limited in many countries. Building national skills, and regional networks of institutions that support those skills, will be crucial if strategic planning is to succeed.

UNAIDS and its Cosponsors are working together to develop skills, to make available tools for strategic planning for HIV, and to create networks that can provide immediate support to countries requesting help with strategic planning. The approach is in constant development, and is being field-tested and evaluated in a number of countries.

Existing UN initiatives

The UN system plays an important role in supporting governments as they develop participatory, situation-specific plans for HIV. UN Theme Groups on HIV/AIDS have already begun supporting a strategic planning process in over 20 countries around the world, and have been instrumental in encouraging their partner ministries or institutions to take an active part in that process. The UNAIDS Secretariat is developing tools to support national planning, and has, together with its Cosponsors, begun to identify and consult institutions that can strengthen capacity for strategic planning in all regions.

Action required at this meeting

The PCB is requested to comment on the strategic approach and to endorse support for national strategic planning for HIV/AIDS as a major priority of the UNAIDS Programme.

The support of the PCB is sought in encouraging national governments and international agencies, bi-lateral, multi-lateral and non-governmental, to participate fully in government-led strategic planning exercises.

The PCB is asked to approve initiatives to strengthen capacity for strategic planning on a regional basis.



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I. Introduction

1. Over the course of the last 15 years, many different approaches have been adopted to try to slow the spread of HIV and minimize its impact on individuals, families and society. UNAIDS believes that the most effective of these approaches are those which build on lessons learned and take advantage of the strengths of different social sectors. They also bear in mind the realities of the situation in which the disease is spreading.

2. Governments planning for the future cannot ignore the potential impact of the epidemic on the human and economic development in their countries, but they can plan to change its course. A strategic approach to planning builds on past experience and helps ensure that resources are used as efficiently as possible.

II. Why strategic planning?

3. Traditional planning methods tend to assume that a given intervention will produce a given result, no matter where it is applied. But HIV does not respond well to such a one-dimensional approach. It is spread by behaviours that are deeply rooted in social, cultural and economic circumstances. Different groups may be vulnerable to the disease and its consequences for different reasons, many because their particular circumstances make it impossible to protect themselves from infection or take advantage of care. Planners need to devise different strategies to meet the needs of each vulnerable group. They ask who is vulnerable and why, and what has been done so far to respond to the needs of that group. Then they seek ways to meet the particular needs of the people involved.

4. Strategic planners look not just at the behaviours driving the epidemic, but at the root causes of those behaviours – causes that may vary from economic crisis to social disruption to religious tradition. They search for opportunities to change the specific situations that put different groups at risk of infection and to meet the needs of those most affected by the epidemic. And they anticipate obstacles to change, and plan ways to overcome them.

III. Learning from experience: the strengths of a strategic approach

5. The partners in the global response to HIV/AIDS have many years of valuable experience in supporting countries as they plan for change and development. In the early years, planning methods were often dictated by an urgent need to help countries plan a rapid response to a frightening epidemic about which little was known. But as knowledge and experience has grown, especially within countries most threatened by the epidemic and its consequences, much has been learned and new methods have evolved.

6. UN Theme Groups on HIV/AIDS are already supporting strategic planning exercises in a number of countries, with planning activities at the national and the district levels. The UNAIDS Secretariat has sought to distill the lessons of the collective experience to date, building a path towards a more effective approach in the future.

7. The following paragraphs describe some of the attributes that have emerged as essential in a successful approach to national strategic planning for HIV.

It is driven and owned by national governments

8. While the international community stands ready to help individual countries deal with the HIV epidemic and its consequences, each national government must ultimately take responsibility for the welfare of its own citizens. Governments set the agenda for social and economic development, so it is governments that bear the responsibility and must take the lead in planning for the response to HIV.

It plans for responses that are relevant to the situations of each individual country

9. In the past, AIDS plans have often been put together at the request of international agencies or bi-lateral donors, and have sometimes reflected the priorities of those institutions more than those of the country itself. A strategic planning process driven by national governments focuses more clearly on the priority areas for the nation, allowing each country to adapt international solutions in ways that best meet the specific circumstances and needs of its citizens, and to expand responses that have emerged at the initiative of its own affected communities.

It brings in many different interest groups, expanding the response to HIV

10. Many communities, institutions, organizations, and individuals have valuable contributions to make to the response to HIV. If they are included in the planning process, their needs can be taken into account and their capacity for action can be harnessed. In a national strategic planning exercise, all major interest groups – those living with HIV and their communities, the private sector, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), regional administrations, bi-lateral donors, the United Nations system and others – are included by the government in the consultation and planning process and involved in implementing plans.

It fosters partnerships across sectors and brings new resources into the response

11. Planners thinking strategically recognize that different sectors of government and society are good at different things. An expanded response is a multi-sectoral response. Instead of writing a plan and then looking for resources to implement it, strategic planners create opportunities for each group or sector to contribute what they do best. Rather than looking for funds to pay for a distribution system for condoms, for instance, they might seek the support of a private company with an existing

network of transport and distributors, freeing up government funds for use on public goods such as surveillance and information systems.

It is a tool for advocacy

12. Strategic planning begins with a clear look at the country's HIV situation, including the progress of the response to date. And a clearly-stated analysis of the country's current situation can become a powerful tool in generating public support for action, and the political will to act. The strategic planning process also creates opportunities for dialogue between different interest groups. It fosters discussion of social, cultural and economic realities, and provides a platform upon which consensus can be built between people and institutions with previously differing view points.

It provides a single framework for external contributions to the response

13. In many countries, the response to HIV is fragmented. Sometimes it involves a lot of duplication, and occasionally elements of the response are irrelevant. A strategic plan channels contributions to the response into areas the country has identified as priority areas for action. Local NGOs, private companies and external donors can use the plan to guide their initiatives, leading to an efficient use of resources and reducing the need for separate situation assessments and plans. The planning process generates dialogue which can lead to greater coordination of efforts and a more efficient division of labour between the different groups involved in the response.

It builds on existing knowledge and experience

14. In the past 15 years, the world has learned a great deal about what works and what does not work in responding to HIV. There are elements of the response that will be common to most countries. But they may not be implemented in exactly the same way. A strategic approach, focusing on the country-specific situation, will point to ways in which responses which are known to succeed in one setting can be adapted to work most effectively in the country-specific situation.

It responds quickly to changing circumstances

15. A strategic plan recognizes that some of the most effective responses to HIV are generated spontaneously by affected communities. A strategic plan builds in mechanisms by which those emerging strategies can be supported and expanded. And it builds in information systems which provide a constant feedback on the progress of the response and changes in the situation so that ineffective strategies can be revised or replaced.

IV. The challenges ahead

16. It is important to be realistic about the challenges of moving towards a more strategic approach. Many of these derive from history and will be overcome only by a concerted effort on the part of those institutions, national and international, most concerned with building up the response to HIV.

The capacity to plan strategically for HIV must be expanded

17. Although the body of experience in planning for HIV points clearly towards the need for a more strategic approach, few countries have undertaken truly strategic planning exercises. In many nations, the capacity for socio-economic analysis exists, but it may never have been applied to the field of HIV or health. And even where there are people and institutions with the skills to analyse the social, economic and cultural forces that are driving the epidemic, the government's ability to use that analysis as the basis of a plan may be limited. The skills involved in strategic planning are not complex; focusing them in the field of HIV will, however, require training.

Traditional planning methods must be adapted and changed

18. For many years, governments have been supported by the international community in formulating workplans based on the assumption that the same response will work for everyone. Lengthy programme reviews have sometimes failed to ask the question most important to a sound analysis of the current response: does it meet the needs of the people in the country who are most affected by or most vulnerable to HIV infection and its impact? The process has often been led by outsiders, and has rarely involved a wide cross-section of the population. It has frequently been a routine exercise aimed principally at generating funds from international sources. This blueprint approach may have been convenient for both international and national partners, and some may not immediately see the need for an approach that is more multi-dimensional. But the continued spread of HIV bears witness to the fact that existing responses are not enough.

19. In addition, planners have rarely been accustomed to involving different interest groups in the planning process. But HIV must be attacked on many fronts; the involvement of different groups in planning will increase the relevance of the response as well as the resources available to it.

Situation analysis requires an open discussion of sensitive issues

20. HIV has thrived on ignorance and denial; an honest analysis of the situations which promote the spread of HIV and aggravate its impact are likely to prove uncomfortable to some interest groups. Without such an honest appraisal, however, it is not possible to plan effectively to change those situations.

Strategic planning methods must be kept practical

21. While the central principles of strategic planning are widely applicable, the process through which they are applied will vary according to country needs and methods. Each country will need to adapt general guidelines to suit its own needs. A single national plan may be too unwieldy for many countries – planning tools may best be used to formulate strategies at a local or provincial level under the guidance of a set of principles set at national level, for instance.

22. In an epidemic where needs are real and immediate, traditional plans that try to cover every aspect of the response may stand in the way of a fast and effective response to immediate needs. Strategic planning, on the other hand, is centred on determining priorities for action. This allows for a quick response to the most pressing needs.

V. Why should UNAIDS and its Cosponsors be involved

23. The strategic planning process must be led by national governments if it is to succeed. This begs the question: why should the international community be involved at all? And what can UNAIDS and its Cosponsors bring to the process that others can't?

The role of the international community

24. The number of countries able to plan and finance their own response to HIV is increasing, but remains limited. The epidemic is still relatively new in many parts of the world, and its complexion is changing in others. Knowledge and understanding are at a premium and resources are stretched. The increasing scale of the epidemic overwhelms existing capacity in many countries, and they will continue to need external help in building up their own ability to prevent HIV spreading and to cope with its impact. The international community can help spread technical know-how and resources to the areas where it is most needed. By participating in a single strategic planning effort, donors can both contribute their own experience and lighten the burden on national counterparts, who may otherwise have to spend time and energy on developing separate plans with each major donor. Multinational organizations and corporations can encourage their local subsidiaries to take part in the national strategic planning process, increasing the pool of resources available in the national response.

The role of UNAIDS and its Cosponsors

25. UNAIDS and its Cosponsoring Organizations have long been involved in helping governments plan for HIV and development. With a mandate to bring together the different strengths of the international community in partnership with countries in a common fight against HIV, they are now uniquely placed to support a more strategic approach to national planning for HIV. The involvement of different sectors in government and society is fundamental to strategic planning. The UNAIDS Cosponsors have different areas of expertise and work with different ministries, institutions and social

groups. Working together through UN Theme Groups on HIV/AIDS, they can bring their partners into a coordinated planning

process where each sector's interests will be considered and where the contribution of each can be mobilized. Common support for national strategic planning provides a working example of closer coordination between UN agencies embodied in proposals for a United Nations Development Assistance Framework.

26. The long-term success of strategic planning clearly lies in the hands of the countries where it will be practiced. The UNAIDS Cosponsors and the Secretariat already work with networks of people and institutions to strengthen skills in many areas. Those networks can be used to increase capabilities in the field of strategic planning for HIV. By bringing together existing networks at each of those levels, the agencies that make up the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS can cut down on the time and resources required to create a core of people and institutions that can support governments in the strategic planning process for HIV.

VI. Current action, future commitments

27. At a recent consultation in Geneva, the constituents of UNAIDS agreed on several steps to move forward in supporting governments as they develop strategic plans for HIV. Their conclusions include the following commitments:

Building capacity for strategic planning

28. The most important dimension in increasing support for strategic planning is to build up networks of institutions, organizations and individuals with the necessary skills. This process is already underway. In October 1997, some 30 planners from various sectors and from all regions gathered in Geneva to discuss the principles of strategic planning for HIV and to contribute their experience to the tools under development. The essence of strategic planning is to respond to specific situations. Capacity development will therefore continue on a regional and sub-regional basis. Regional consultations and skills development sessions have already been held in Southern Africa and Eastern Europe and will be followed in 1998 in other regions. This will build on existing regional networks, expanding the exchange of information and experience and strengthening capacity to respond to regional needs in strategic planning.

Developing tools for strategic planning

29. In consultation with Cosponsors, the Secretariat is developing a series of tools to help governments in their strategic planning exercises. These fall into two major groups:

(i) Guidelines for the strategic planning process

A four-part guide to the strategic planning process is already available. It includes:

- Guide to situation analysis
- Guide to response analysis
- Guide to strategic plan formulation
- Guide to resource mobilization through strategic planning

30. The guidelines have been prepared in working draft form, incorporating contributions from Cosponsors, national programme managers and other specialists in planning. They will be updated and modified in the light of experience in countries implementing the process, and adapted into regionally-specific versions.

(ii) Best Practice guidelines in key focus areas for response

31. A central principle of strategic planning is that plans must be made to suit situation-specific needs and circumstances. However, experience of the epidemic has shown that there are many areas of common importance that cut across a number of different social, cultural and economic areas. Equally, there are many responses that, if adapted appropriately, will be effective in many different settings.

32. In its Best Practice Collection, UNAIDS has gathered information on areas of common concern, as well as details of responses that have been shown to work. Used in conjunction with the strategic planning process guidelines, this collection provides detailed technical information on a wide range of areas which are of crucial importance both in analysing the situation and response, and in formulating policy. Best Practice Collection documents summarize what has been shown to work in slowing the spread of the epidemic and reducing its impact. They discuss the challenges which need to be taken into account in adapting response to specific country situations, and suggest possible opportunities for meeting those challenges.

Implementing and evaluating the approach

33. This approach to strategic planning draws lessons from a wide range of experience in planning and programme management. UN Theme Groups on HIV/AIDS have supported governments in its use, at least in part, in some 20 countries to date, and more are requesting and being provided with guidance every month. Some 10 countries will be identified before the end of 1997 where agencies will work closely together to promote the strategic approach to planning for HIV. In conjunction with the UNAIDS Cosponsors, the Secretariat is developing a system for evaluating and documenting the success of the planning process in those countries. The experiences will be shared through the regional networks of institutions being developed as part of the initiative to build capacity in strategic planning.