

UNAIDS PROGRAMME COORDINATING BOARD WORKING GROUP
THEMATIC SEGMENT on COVID-19 and HIV

***COVID-19 and HIV: sustaining HIV gains and building back better and fairer
HIV responses***

MEETING SUMMARY: SECOND MEETING OF THE WORKING GROUP

DATE: Friday 21 May 2021

MEETING AGENDA

1. Welcome and introduction
 2. Presentation of and discussion on the first draft Background Note for the thematic segment
 3. Presentation of and discussion on the draft agenda for the thematic segment
 4. Way forward
 5. Any other business
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SUMMARY

1. WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION

Mr. Morten Ussing, Chief of Governance and Multilateral Affairs, UNAIDS Secretariat, welcomed the PCB Working Group to its second meeting for the preparation of the Thematic Segment of the 48th PCB on *COVID-19 and HIV: sustaining HIV gains and building back better and fairer HIV responses*.

Mr. Ussing thanked the working group members on the rich comments sent on the draft outline and “framing questions” and mentioned that the Secretariat had worked hard to integrate them into the outline and to refine the issues to be addressed by the thematic segment.

The Secretariat said that suggestions from the working group members were also welcome on the draft agenda and speakers as soon as possible, as well as how to make the thematic segment as engaging as possible in a virtual format. The Secretariat informed the group that the meeting was being recorded.

2. PRESENTATION of the FIRST DRAFT of the BACKGROUND NOTE for the THEMATIC SEGMENT

Nertila Tavanxhi, UNAIDS COVID-19 and HIV Coordinator, Fast Track Implementation Department, introduced the draft Background Note for the thematic segment. Ms. Tavanxhi explained that the Background Note has greatly benefited from the helpful comments from the working group.

Ms. Tavanxhi said that the Background Note starts by giving the bigger picture of where we are and developments since December, then covers the impact of COVID-19 on people living with HIV, vaccine utility, and interaction of different essential services linked to HIV and mental health. Following this part, key issues and lessons learned that emerged from the responses are analysed to respond to the request of the working group. The third part focuses on “building back better”, explaining what we mean by it. The detailed response of the Joint Programme is included as an annex. Ms. Tavanxhi said that it was up to the working group to advise if this part should remain in the annex or be moved back to the main part of the document.

Ms. Tavanxhi gave further details on the content of the Background Note:

- COVID-19 has impacted the HIV response, essential health services, inequalities between and within countries.
- Although we now have a vaccine and more tests, there is vaccine and diagnostics inequality which also has economic impact. If low-income countries are not provided with commodities, the world is estimated to lose USD 3 trillion.
- The COVID-19 pandemic has increased gender-based violence, and impacted economies and social protection.
- Services have been impacted: mostly TB services.
- 40% increase in demand for services related to gender-based violence, also an increase for mental health services and opioid substitution therapy (OST).
- Evidence indicates that living with HIV and TB or other co-morbidities increases the risk for bad COVID-19 disease incomes.
- COVID-19 vaccines are safe for the use of people living with HIV, we their full use should be promoted for people living with HIV.

- The Joint Programme has been agile and helpful in responding to COVID-19. It managed to fight to keep HIV in the centre and give a helping hand at the same time in the COVID-19 response.
- The Joint Programme mobilized more funds, but the reprogramming exercise showed that the strength of the Joint Programme is not money but because it is a multisectoral partnership responding holistically to disease through human rights-equity-based and people centered approaches. We have worked to turn this crisis into an opportunity, to make services cheaper and move away from facilities, making things more acceptable for patients and helping with adherence. There is a move towards multiple disease approach and away from verticalization.
- What we have learned from the HIV infrastructure is that these have been good investments and have served HIV and have been adapted and served COVID-19 too.
- However, despite efforts there have been HIV service interruptions and mental health services have been disrupted, and especially women and girls affected.
- Communities, although at the fore front of the COVID-19 response, have not been recognized in the same way as in the HIV decision making sphere. Their efforts have not been matched by funding. We are not fully utilizing the HIV response lessons learned.
- There is a need to increase health budgets to be able to recover.
- Although socio-economic protection is in place in some countries people living with HIV are often not benefiting from them.

Ms. Tavanxhi said that the Background Note highlights that moving forward, a key emphasis should be placed on:

- The essential role of communities.
- HIV and pandemic preparedness need specific funding to ensure access to services for everyone who need them regardless of whether they can pay.
- A response to HIV and to any pandemic should apply a whole-of-society response to address the needs of people holistically.

3. DISCUSSION ON THE DRAFT BACKGROUND NOTE

The PCB working group welcomed the draft Background Note. Specific comments included the following:

Member states

- Suggested to be more specific about the HIV response specificity which can benefit the COVID-19.
- Indicated that it would be helpful to tease out what has been achieved by the Joint Programme itself and what by individual agencies that make up the Joint Programme as part of their other work.
- Asked whether a geographical approach with key targets per region was going to be prepared and suggested recommending both short term and long-term recommendations for the future.

Cosponsors

- Reiterated the need to have a video paying tribute to the people who have lost their lives to either HIV or COVID-19 in the past year.

- Said that the COVID-19 Response Mechanism (C19RM) proposals are showing that communities that have been so instrumental are not accepted enough in the COVID-19 response compared to the HIV response: what are we saying needs to be done to change this?
- Underlined that we should also focus on the positive effects of COVID-19, taking things that were temporary and make them permanent, showcase the gains to preserve, especially community-led responses, multi-month dispensing (MMD), digital health innovations, and to make those shifts permanent.
- Highlighted how the global COVID-19 pandemic encouraged coordination amongst ministries to collaborate on the response.

PCB NGO Delegation

- Said that the Civil Society advisory group had met and provided input.
- Emphasized the intersection between COVID-19 and HIV criminalization, how human rights were suspended in some countries in the context of COVID-19, with police violence increasing.
- Highlighted that some successful interventions were implemented during COVID-19 which have benefitted the HIV response as well as COVID-19 and underline the positive impacts of the COVID-10 pandemic: Opioid substitution therapy (OST) and MMD were deemed impossible and suddenly it all became possible during the pandemic.
- Built the case that more resources are needed for community-led responses rather than tapping into the dichotomy of choosing between the HIV and the COVID-19 responses.
- Said that the human rights perspective should be highlighted, rights that were compromised in some countries where lists of people with COVID-19 were shared, where there have been issues of increased violence (by law enforcement) particularly against key populations and drug users. The decrease in OST, ART, needle and syringe services, and the difficult to access and use them for people who are locked down or detained.
- Emphasized the fragmented and wrong information accessible in the communities.

It was recalled that decision points would only be taken at the following PCB in December 2021 as per all thematic segments, so we would have to find the right balance on how we present short term and longer-term steps at this point in time.

4. PRESENTATION OF THE DRAFT AGENDA FOR THE THEMATIC SEGMENT

Ms. Tavanxhi explained that the thematic segment would open with a video paying tribute to the people who have lost their lives to COVID-19/HIV. This would be followed by the opening and the session on setting the scene which would provide an introduction of the topic.

It was proposed to have three keynote speakers, including the UNAIDS Executive Director, a person living with HIV affected by COVID-19 and possibly a country with a successful response to both HIV and COVID-19.

This would be followed by a presentation on COVID-19 and HIV data and information as well as a presentation on evidence-based responses to HIV in the context of COVID-19 and impact on HIV programming and inequalities.

Two panel discussions are proposed.

- Panel 1: Turning a crisis into an opportunity – leveraging lessons learnt and the HIV infrastructure for responding to the colliding epidemics
- Panel 2: Building back better

There would be remarks from the floor following each session. The last session would summarize conclusions and ways forward.

Ms. Tavanxhi said that the Secretariat would welcome ideas on the panels and speakers keeping in mind that this thematic segment is virtual.

5. DISCUSSION ON THE DRAFT AGENDA FOR THE THEMATIC SEGMENT

Member States

- Noted the importance of giving more space to the panels, where people learn the most, and to perhaps consider shortening the opening part.

Cosponsors

- Highlighted “setting the scenes” part could be shorter because people are attuned to the data by now and would only need to latest updates.

PCB NGO Delegation

- Suggested to have a person from the community to share the closing remarks with the Deputy Executive Director.

6. WAY FORWARD

Mr. Ussing said that the Secretariat was looking forward to written suggestions. He encouraged working group members to give speaker names as well as ideas, so that the Secretariat can finalize the agenda.

The Secretariat encouraged members to comment on both the agenda and the Background Note itself, with the deadline of COB Tuesday 25 May.

The Secretariat reminded participants that a call for good practices and case studies from countries had been sent out and encouraged participants to send relevant case studies.

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