Putting knowledge to work:

Technical Resource Networks for Effective Responses to HIV/AIDS

Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS

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KEY MATERIAL

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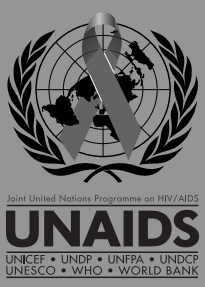

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Table Of Contents

Acronyms and Abbreviations **3**

Summary **4**

1. Introduction **5**
1.1. What is this document about? 5
1.2. To whom is it addressed? 5
1.3. How is it organized? 6

2. Basic Concepts **7**
2.1. Definitions 7
2.2. Types of Technical Resource Networks 7
2.3. Rationale for networking 8

3. What Do HIV/AIDS Networks Do? **10**
3.1. Key functions 10
3.2. TRNs and knowledge management: the practice in 'best practice' 12

4. Developing and Managing Networks **14**
4.1. Formation, funding and management 14
4.2. Challenges 15
4.3. Information technology and TRNs 16

5. An Agenda for Action **20**

References **22**

Acronyms and Abbreviations

AF-AIDS	Regional electronic forum on AIDS in Sub-Saharan Africa (English)
CIDA	Canadian International Development Agency
CPAs	Country Programme Advisers (of UNAIDS)
EU	European Union
GLAMS	Latin American Network on Women and AIDS
HIPC	Heavily Indebted Poor Countries
IAEN	International AIDS Economics Network
ICASO	International Council of AIDS Service Organizations
ICTs	UNAIDS' Intercountry Teams
ICT/ESA	UNAIDS Intercountry Team for Eastern and Southern Africa
NGO	Non-governmental Organisation
MTCT	Mother-to-Child Transmission
PLWHAs	Persons Living with HIV/AIDS
RATN	Regional AIDS Training Network
REDPES	Latin American Network on AIDS and Strategic Planning
SAfAIDS	Southern Africa AIDS Information Dissemination Service
SAFCO	Regional electronic forum on AIDS in Sub-Saharan Africa (French)
SEA-AIDS	Regional electronic forum on AIDS in Southeast Asia and the Pacific
SEAL	AIDS and Economics in Latin America Network
SIDALAC	Regional HIV/AIDS Initiative for Latin America and the Caribbean
STI	Sexually Transmitted Infection
TRN	Technical Resource Network
UN	United Nations
UNAIDS	Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS
WHO	World Health Organization

Summary

This document provides guidance to practitioners who seek to improve their networking skills for effectiveness in HIV/AIDS programmes and to groups of practitioners who are trying to establish an AIDS technical network in some specific geographical or thematic area of specialization. The complexity and scale of the HIV/AIDS epidemic have spawned a number of programmes aimed at influencing the course of the epidemic. There are wide variations in the scope, technical quality and effectiveness of these programmes. Although relatively successful efforts have been documented in various forms (including collections of 'best practices') the adaptation of these success stories has been slow and patchy. Technical Resource Networks (TRNs) constitute a means of accelerating, in a professional and systematic fashion, the spread of effective responses to HIV/AIDS. They are groups of individuals, communities, institutions or governments that work together towards a shared objective in the fight against AIDS.

Networks assist in building local technical capacity, expanding national and regional advocacy, sharing of information, building peer support and facilitating collective action. By improving knowledge, providing support, developing capacity and sharing approaches proven elsewhere, these networks can both strengthen HIV prevention efforts on the ground and influence policy development at the regional and national levels. UNAIDS supports these efforts though funding and technical collaboration to improve institutional capacity in cooperating countries and subregions.

In the near term, UNAIDS will continue to support networking using the following mutually reinforcing strategies: development of resource materials, expansion of the knowledge base, initiation of new networks on priority themes, as well as improved communications for networking.

1. Introduction

1.1. What is this document about?

This document examines the importance of Technical Resource Networks (TRNs) in the response to HIV/AIDS and defines an agenda for the rapid development of these networks. As the epidemic of HIV/AIDS has grown, so have programmes and projects to combat it. It is striking that there are pockets of excellence in research and programme effectiveness, but that these pockets are outnumbered by less effective efforts that have much to learn from the successful responses. Among the low- and middle-income countries, programmes in Thailand, Senegal and Uganda are often cited as examples of large-scale and successful efforts to curb the spread of HIV. In other places, programmes of limited scale have recorded impressive successes, e.g. peer education, condom promotion and treatment of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) among sex workers in Nairobi. For the most part, however, individuals and groups too often work on common problems in isolation from one another. There is a need to make better use of the knowledge of what works against HIV/AIDS, to increase this knowledge base and to share it more effectively and efficiently. In this context TRNs are becoming increasingly common mechanisms for strengthening and catalyzing national responses to HIV/AIDS.

This document presents an illustrative framework for understanding how networks and networking add value to HIV/AIDS activities. It is the lead volume in a planned series of publications on networks and networking. Subsequent publications will focus on case studies of specific networks and on tools for networking.

Box 1. Key questions to be addressed in this paper

- What are Technical Resource Networks (TRNs)?
- What can TRNs help to achieve?
- How are TRNs initiated and maintained?
- How does UNAIDS support TRNs?
- What are the future roles of TRNs in the response to HIV/AIDS?

1.2. To whom is it addressed?

This document is a guide to effective ***networking*** for individuals and institutions working on programmes to reverse the course of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. It is addressed to programme managers, network facilitators and others interested in expanding the response to HIV/AIDS, including UNAIDS Cosponsors, non-governmental organizations, bilateral organizations and multilateral agencies.

1.3. How is it organized?

Following this introduction, the basic concepts are covered in Chapter 2. These include definitions and a typology of TRNs. Chapter 3 is on the strategic basis for networking. This is followed in Chapter 4 by practical notes on developing and managing networks. In conclusion, Chapter 5 presents an agenda for the rapid development of effective networks against HIV/AIDS.

2. Basic Concepts

2.1. Definitions

Technical Resource Networks are groups of individuals coming from communities, private institutions and governments that work together towards a shared objective: to help achieve specified goals and to improve the performance of programmes supported by network members. Networks can operate at global, regional or national levels. The term 'network' has increasingly been used to describe a range of coalitions and organizations, which work together in the field of HIV/AIDS. These networks can range from specialized 'think tanks' on different aspects of the epidemic to regional support networks, linking together people and programmes with shared challenges.

Box 2. Characteristics of Technical Resource Networks

- Common goals and interests
- Members (individuals, projects, programmes, research institutions)
- Regular communications
- Focus on a specific issue and/or region
- Coordinating mechanism (secretariat, managing committee)
- Common workplan and operational budget

Networking involves making contacts and encouraging reciprocal information exchange, meetings and voluntary collaboration. Networking should encourage and facilitate the autonomy of colleagues rather than reinforcing dependency associations (Starkey, 1997).

2.2. Types of Technical Resource Networks

TRNs exist in various forms and for a number of purposes. For example, a network can cover a particular theme and particular geographic region, such as the newly formed AIDS Strategic Planning Network in Western and Central Africa. Networks may be classified according to geographic scope, thematic focus or membership criteria.

Geographic scope. Networks may be at the global, regional, national or sub-national level. In 1999, the UNAIDS Secretariat reviewed a convenience sample of 52 networks being supported by UNAIDS (UNAIDS, 1999). The results showed that 23 networks (44.2%) were at the global level; 25 networks (48.1%) at the regional level; 3 networks (5.8%) at the sub-regional level; and 1 network (1.9%) at the country level.

Thematic networks: These typically address a single subject or group of subjects. They may be among the core disciplines that underpin responses to HIV/AIDS – for example, the International AIDS Economics Network and the Reference Group on Estimates and

Modelling of HIV/AIDS. Others include networks of persons working on the prevention of Mother-to-Child Transmission of HIV and networks on access to pharmaceuticals. Some TRNs focus on developing practical skills and/or building competencies in specific disciplines. Examples include the Africa-based Regional AIDS Training Network and the Asian Harm Reduction Network. Some networks were established primarily to exchange the latest research methods and findings in HIV/AIDS. These networks include the Reference Group on Estimates and Modelling of HIV/AIDS, Monitoring the AIDS Pandemic Network, and HIV Virus Isolation and Characterization Network. Six of the networks sampled by UNAIDS represent inter-agency working groups with varying frequencies of meetings and intensity of activities.

Membership. Some networks are closed while others are open. Closed networks tend to focus on technical subjects of interest to a small number of specialists. An example of a closed network is the Reference Group on Estimates and Modelling of HIV/AIDS. Open networks tend to be less specialized. An example of an open network is SAFCO, an independent public forum on the response to HIV/AIDS in French-speaking Western and Central Africa. Individuals wishing to join SAFCO may do so by accessing the website "http://www.hivnet.ch/fdp/".

2.3. Rationale for networking

Due to the complexity of the HIV/AIDS epidemic and the differing capacities of countries and institutions to respond to it, there are wide variations in the scope, effectiveness and efficiency of responses to HIV/AIDS. Drawing on experiences from around the world, effective approaches, policies, strategies and technologies are identified as 'best practice' by the UNAIDS Secretariat and Cosponsors. The process of best practice goes beyond documentation: practices and lessons learned are promoted and disseminated through the UNAIDS Best Practice Collection, pilot projects, country-level programmes, technical assistance, exchange forums and technical resource networks. TRNs help to improve availability of, and accessibility to, technical know-how. This is needed to help countries and local groups in their response to the HIV epidemic.

Box 3. The rationale for networking

- The overriding rationale for networking is to improve the outcomes of programmes in response to HIV/AIDS, measured in terms of quantifiable reductions in the incidence of HIV, adequate care for persons living with HIV/AIDS and the mitigation of impacts on individuals, households and countries.
- By developing capacity, improving knowledge, providing technical support and sharing approaches and best practices, the networks have both enhanced HIV prevention efforts on the ground and influenced policy development at the regional and national levels.

The acceleration of national-level efforts to expand the response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic has resulted in a substantially increased demand for technical resources – both information and expertise – in a widening array of programme areas. At the same time, effective

programme approaches are often specific to cultural, resource and political environments. Individual agencies have made, and continue to make, substantial contributions in specific areas of HIV prevention and care. But it is also increasingly evident that single institutions, whether government departments, UN agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), or groups of people living with HIV/AIDS, do not have the capacity to deal with the multiple determinants of HIV on their own. The need to act simultaneously and synergistically in a number of areas such as targeted interventions, health services, communications, legal reform, education, rural development and the status of women, requires that a range of technical issues must be addressed at the same time. This has further increased the need within countries for access to current technical information and expertise.

Box 4. What influences performance in HIV/AIDS control?

The major factors influencing the level of performance include the following:

- The policy environment, including demonstrated political commitment by government and the commitment of the civil society
- Capacity – technical, managerial and political – to analyse problems and to develop effective strategies for tackling them
- Clarity of objectives in specific and measurable terms
- Information (and knowledge) base
- Use of scientific evidence of what works in the response to HIV/AIDS
- Quality, relevance and timeliness of inputs
- Financial and human resources
- Technology as a tool for exchange of information and knowledge
- Compatibility between interventions and institutions with responsibility for implementing them

Networks can help to strengthen the response to HIV/AIDS by improving the quality of technical support in each of these areas.

3. What Do HIV/AIDS Networks Do?

3.1. Key functions

Networks assist in building local technical capacity, national and regional advocacy, sharing of information, peer support and facilitating collective action. They create influential coalitions among programmes, giving them the critical mass needed to respond to HIV/AIDS at the global, regional and national levels. At the regional level, they help to address cross-border issues that may drive or be the result of the HIV/AIDS epidemic and at the local level, networks can be highly effective for sharing skills, information, resources and peer support.

Box 5. Networks and networking contribute to:

Capacity building
- Acting as a resource on different aspects of response to HIV/AIDS
- Strengthening the ability of local communities and programmes to respond to HIV/AIDS, thus reducing reliance on outside assistance
- Sharing global and regional expertise with partners at the country level

Solidarity and advocacy
- Reducing isolation of members and providing support;
- Strengthening responses in important but poorly addressed areas of HIV/AIDS;

Information sharing
- Promoting the exchange of ideas, insights, experience and skills
- Exchanging and documenting best practices from global, regional and national experience

Funding
- Mobilizing and utilizing financial resources for maximum impact

Most importantly, networks can actually foster the development of new programmes and policies. Thus, they can help to reduce a region's reliance on direct external assistance. This, in turn, builds capacity and enhances the network's functioning. A single network may not perform all the functions outlined in Box 5 however, several TRNs based at the Instituto Nacional de Salud Publica in Cuernavaca, Mexico perform most of these key functions (Box 6).

Box 6. The Instituto Nacional de Salud Publica, Cuernavaca, Mexico.

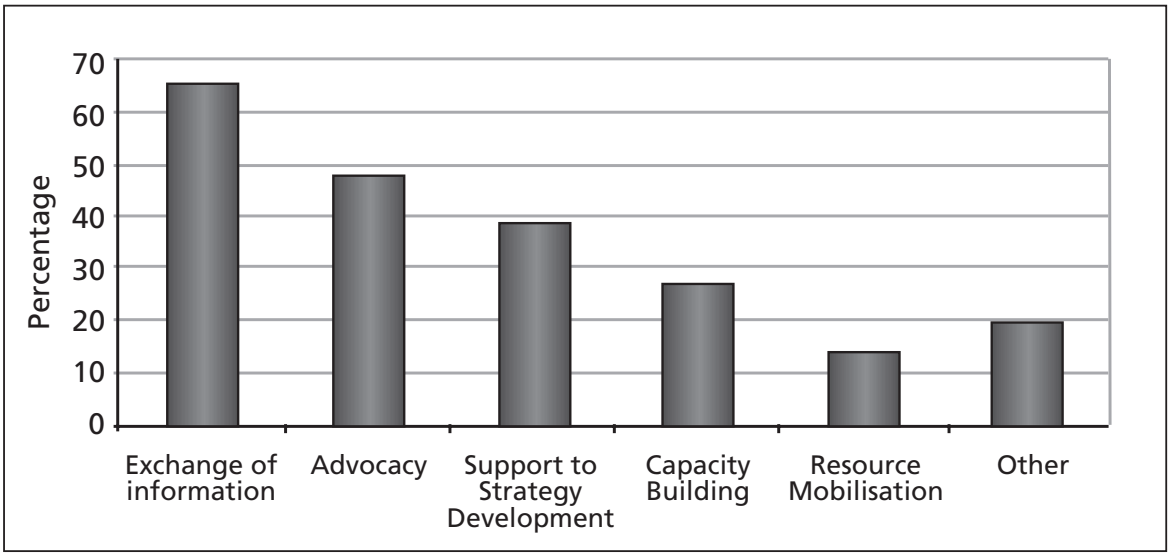
This UNAIDS Collaborating Centre has a wide range of activities in AIDS education and research. In addition, it serves as the headquarters for the following networks:

- ***Latin American Network on Women and AIDS (GLAMS)***. This network promotes research and prevention of HIV infection among women in Latin America through an information exchange network and advocacy. Its activities include development and distribution of a quarterly newsletter; maintenance of a website and an electronic discussion forum; and publications on AIDS and women in Latin America. It receives financial support from the MacArthur Foundation.
- ***AIDS and Economics in Latin America (SEAL).*** This network facilitates communication among researchers working on AIDS and economics in Latin America. It improves access to information on research related to the economic determinants and consequences of AIDS in Latin America. Its activities include maintenance of a website and an electronic discussion forum; technical publications; maintenance of a virtual library of grey literature on AIDS and economics in Latin America; and development of methods for National AIDS Accounts. It collaborates with and/or receives financial support from SIDALAC, UNAIDS and IAEN.
- ***Latin American Network on AIDS and Strategic Planning (REDPES).*** This network aims to: (a) facilitate communication among researchers and policy-makers working on AIDS and strategic planning in Latin America and (b) improve access to information and strengthen capacity for strategic planning on AIDS. Its activities include provision of technical assistance on strategic planning and AIDS; exchange of experiences with other regional networks; maintenance of a website and an electronic discussion forum. It collaborates with and is funded by UNAIDS. REDPES takes the view that strategic plans should be considered as guiding documents that are open to adjustment. Such plans have either been completed or are in draft forms in several countries in the region. In six countries, (Chile, Peru, Colombia, Guatemala, Honduras and Mexico) REDPES has supported the development of "integrated plans" for United Nations agencies in the Thematic Groups that support the national strategic plans.

In the 1999 review of TRNs cited earlier, UNAIDS Secretariat staff members were asked to identify the overall objectives of the networks with which they collaborated. More than one objective was marked where appropriate. Figure 1 presents the percentage of networks with the following objectives: (a) exchange of information, experience, or scientific findings; (b) advocacy; (c) support to strategy development; (d) capacity building through workshops or meetings; (e) resource mobilization; and (f) other.

Figure 1: Objectives of the networks

(Percentage of Total of Networks, n=52)



Source: UNAIDS, 1999

The exchange of information, experience, and scientific findings was the predominant objective of the networks (65.4% or 34 networks) followed by advocacy (48.1% or 25 networks), support to strategy development (38.5% or 20 networks) and capacity building (26.9% or 14 networks). Other objectives (19.2% or 10 networks) included conducting situation analyses and needs assessments, promotion of collaboration/cooperation, and/or identifying research needs.

3.2. TRNs and knowledge management: the practice in 'best practice'

Knowledge management is the systematic dissemination, sharing and adaptation of information and experiences. Knowledge management systems are developed to improve an organisation's effectiveness and efficiency. Much of the initial work on knowledge management was done in the for-profit sector, where efficiency is a major concern. Systems that help to eliminate such waste are attractive to the corporate sector. They are equally attractive to development organizations, particularly for the transfer of internal knowledge and the dissemination of 'best practice'. For development agencies, programme managers and analysts working on HIV/AIDS, the crucial issue is how to use effectively the growing collection of 'best

practice' materials. TRNs facilitate this through the dissemination and adaptation of such best practices.

Knowledge management systems seem to work best when the people who generate the knowledge are also those who store it, explain it to others and coach them as they try to apply the knowledge. It has been well documented, however, that typical approaches to knowledge management actually widen the gap between knowing and doing (Box 7).

Box 7. How can typical knowledge management practices make knowing-doing gaps worse?

- Knowledge management efforts mostly emphasize technology and the transfer of codified information.
- Knowledge management tends to treat knowledge as a tangible thing, as a stock or a quantity, and therefore separates the knowledge from its intended use.
- Formal systems cannot easily store or transfer knowledge that is not easily described or codified but is nonetheless essential for doing the work called *tacit* knowledge.
- The people responsible for transferring and implementing knowledge management frequently do not understand the actual work being documented.
- Knowledge management tends to focus on specific practices, while ignoring the importance of philosophy.

Source: Pfeffer J, Sutton R. *The knowing-doing gap: how smart companies turn knowledge into action.* Harvard Business School Press. Cambridge, MA. p22. 2000

The important consideration here is that effective knowledge management *involves sharing know-how* in addition to sharing knowledge. How might TRNs serve as a mechanism for effective management of knowledge? First, we note that in the absence of relevant information and knowledge, organizations (including governments) are less likely to make sound choices. Second, we turn to the social learning theory, which states that individuals learn from others whom they observe, and then imitate by following a similar (but not necessarily identical) behaviour. Such social modelling frequently occurs through diffusion networks. By linking innovators with others who are tackling similar issues, TRNs can perform a catalytic role in the diffusion of innovations for HIV/AIDS control – so-called *diffusion networks* (Rogers, 1999). Diffusion scholars have long recognized that an individual's decision about an innovation may not be an instantaneous act. Rogers (1995) presents a model of the innovation-decision process that is shown below in Box 8. At the same time, similar ideas may develop in different places in response to related problems. TRNs bring together workers in diverse settings, enabling them to share ideas and tools for better performance in the fight against HIV/AIDS.

4. Developing and Managing Networks

4.1. Formation, funding and management

Networks are formed in response to perceived needs. Forming a network usually requires immense commitment and effort from a small group of individuals or agencies. Sustaining a network can be equally challenging as the network's founders struggle to generate the funding, membership, activities and structure to ensure that the network survives and grows. In light of these challenges, the International Council of AIDS Service Organizations (ICASO; www.icaso.org) identified eight key steps to building a network (ICASO, 1997), to which items 9 and 10 have been added in this document (Box 8).

Box 8. Ten steps in building and sustaining a network

1. **Prepare a statement of purpose**. A statement of purpose is a precise and agreed-upon statement of the reason for a network's existence, the values which underline the network and what the members want to achieve.
2. **Define goals and objectives**. A goal is a broad statement that describes the changes that members want to achieve through their actions. Objectives are specific, measurable statements of the desired changes that a network intends to accomplish by a given time.
3. **Create an action plan.** An action plan is a set of steps that are developed to achieve a specific objective. At a minimum an action plan should (a) identify the activities needed to accomplish an objective, (b) identify resources, (c) designate responsibilities to persons in the network, (d) set a timetable for actions and (e) implement, monitor and evaluate.
4. **Establish ground rules**. Early on in the process of networking it is important to address the issue of how members of the network are to interact with one another. ICASO has identified 13 examples of ground rules, of which the following are examples: (a) come to meetings prepared to listen, ponder, debate and question, (b) use your role in the network to build group strength, to facilitate decision making in which everyone can feel comfortable and (c) stay informed about issues related to the work of the network, building your knowledge and understanding of all sides of the issue.
5. **Define a decision-making process.** Decisions can be made in many different ways. Three typical forms of decision making in networks are command, consultative and consensus.
6. **Prepare a communications plan.** This addresses the timely transmission and receipt of information. For formal communications within the network, members may choose combinations of the following: meetings, newsletters, faxes, phone calls, e-mail or web-based discussion. Informal communications among members are less structured, need to be encouraged and never thwarted.
7. **Choose an organization structure.** The key principle is that the structure should help the network to achieve its goals. In practice, it may require the creation of units, including committees or working groups, a coordination unit or secretariat, office staff and a decision-making body.

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8. **Secure resources.** There are three major forms of resources required for networking: money, people and in-kind contributions.
9. **Define responsibilities.** These include responsibilities for making and executing decisions, convening meetings, initiating communications and mobilizing resources.
10. **Develop monitoring and evaluation plan.** A monitoring and evaluation plan is needed to assess progress toward set objectives and to enable corrective action where necessary.

Source: International Council of AIDS Service Organizations. *HIV/AIDS Networking Guide*. 1997, ICASO. Ottawa. pp. 9-17.

4.2. Challenges

Networks face multiple challenges. They include time constraints, limited financial resources, limited technical capacity at the local level, divergent views among funding institutions and technical barriers to the delivery of network services. How well these are resolved will affect the success of the network. Several networks have gone through the formative stages and achieved some of their objectives. They include the Africa-based Regional AIDS Training Network (Box 9) and the Asian Harm Reduction Network (Box 10).

Box 9. The Regional AIDS Training Network (RATN), Nairobi, Kenya.

The Regional AIDS Training Network (RATN) is innovative and adds value to country-level work. RATN includes 13 partner institutions and 9 affiliate institutions in Eastern and Southern Africa, working with WHO, EU, as well as academic and research institutions in Belgium, Canada, Kenya and South Africa.

As part of its benefits to African countries, RATN supports curriculum development, identifies and supports regional training venues, and facilitates communications among institutions, trainers and trainees. As of mid-1999, RATN had served 470 course participants from 17 African countries. Courses include AIDS counselling, management of STI, community care, communications, adult education, policy and planning, research methodology and laboratory management. RATN is gender-sensitive in the content of the course and in the mix of course participants. Former course participants now have a variety of responsibilities for community care and counseling in countries including Kenya, Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

Expected long-term impacts include: (a) strengthened capacities of regional institutions to function as innovative centres for research and training in STI/HIV; (b) improved skills of STI/AIDS workers in the region; (c) effective exchanges of strategies and information among countries in the region; and (d) improved care, and a decline in the incidence of STI/HIV.

Box 10. The Asian Harm Reduction Network (AHRN)

AHRN is a regional organisation that targets HIV and injecting drug use (IDU). This technical resource network has become an important mechanism for promoting the harm reduction approach in Asia and strengthening HIV prevention among injecting drug users (IDUs).

Among other benefits to countries in the region, the network has proved to be a valuable resource and mechanism for developing and conducting national and multi-country training activities on HIV prevention and harm reduction. These activities have occurred throughout Asia and have targeted policy makers, health workers, law enforcement officials, drug-treatment workers, government and non-government staff and others interested in harm reduction. Training is a useful approach through which AHRN has built capacity at the country level for responses to HIV and IDU.

Some of the lessons in developing and managing AHRN are outlined below.

- Having a funded secretariat, staffed by a full-time coordinator (the executive director), was critical to developing the network, servicing its membership and securing funding for subsequent years.
- Sustaining the network required enormous time, effort and patience from AHRN staff and management.
- Developing AHRN's activities, establishing its secretariat and securing funding required considerable professional expertise.
- Having a broad funding base was important.
- Cross-cultural adaptation of harm reduction strategies was critical to their acceptance.
- Support from local organizations and individuals has been critical to the network's recognition and success.

4.3. Information technology and TRNs

E-mail discussion forums provide opportunities for people to share ideas and information on various topics. Some of these forums are open, such as AF-AIDS and SEA-AIDS, which can be joined by any individual or organization working in the area of HIV/AIDS or interested in the topic (to join, sign up through www.hivnet.ch/fdp/). These forums aim to encourage organizations and individuals to share experiences on HIV/AIDS, learn from the experiences of others or debate issues of a topical nature.

The e-groups set up by the UNAIDS Intercountry Team for Eastern and Southern Africa (ICT/ESA) aim to facilitate the flow of information and to help TRNs share best practices, research and issues emerging from countries (Box 11). 'E-groups' is a web-based application (www.egroups.com) provided free of charge to the user. There are essentially two services related to the e-groups: a group e-mail address and distribution to the group; and a website with various functions that facilitate networking and information sharing among the group.

These functions include:

- *The Document Vault*. Documents of interest can be uploaded and stored in the vault.
- Links to World Wide Web Pages of interest.
- A chat section, which can be used for online meetings, etc.
- A database feature where the contact details of all the members can be stored.
- A calendar feature for arranging meetings.

Box 11. TRNs and the Web: Focus on Eastern and Southern Africa

The UNAIDS Intercountry Team for Eastern and Southern Africa is facilitating the use of information technology by technical resource networks. These networks are:

- ***The UNAIDS E-group***. This serves as a platform for sharing information among the ICT, the Country Programme Advisers, Junior Professional Officers, Theme Group Chairpersons and the Cosponsors of UNAIDS. This network is used to update members on regional news and to share information on ICT activities at the national level that may benefit others.
- ***The Religious E-group***. This was developed to support a core group of religious organizations to discuss community mobilization in the context of HIV/AIDS control. The e-group will be taken over by the Norwegian Church AID, which is also exploring the possibility of providing financial assistance to members to cover their connectivity costs. On-going discussions address broadening the core members by inviting other religious bodies to become involved in HIV/AIDS-related issues.
- ***The Debt-for-AIDS E-group***. The e-group's purpose is to share relevant information and perspectives with key stakeholders working on Debt-for-AIDS activities. Many countries with high HIV prevalence are also heavily indebted to external institutions and governments. Debt service obligations reduce public funds that might otherwise be available for AIDS control programmes. Debt-for-AIDS seeks to alleviate poverty and support development by putting the AIDS control agenda in the key development instruments of these countries, including their Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers, debt relief agreements and Medium-Term Expenditure Frameworks. For countries eligible for debt relief under the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative, Debt-for-AIDS urges that funds from debt relief be tied in part to AIDS control programmes, through short-term actions and medium-term goals. Stakeholders include government representatives, civil society, UN agencies and creditors. This e-group had a membership of 300 persons as of mid-2000.
- ***HIV/AIDS Media E-group***. This e-group is jointly moderated by UNAIDS and SAfAIDS and aims to provide journalists in the region with updated information on HIV/AIDS.

Box 12. TRNs and the Web: Focus on the Asia-Pacific Region.

The UNAIDS Asia-Pacific Intercountry Team (APICT) facilitates five electronic networks in support of technical resource networks. These networks are:

- ***The UNAIDS APICT E-group (APICT-net)***: A platform for sharing information among the UN family members in the Asia Pacific Region, specifically Country Programme Advisers, Junior Professional Officers, UNAIDS Theme Group Chairpersons and the UNAIDS Cosponsors. This network is used to update members on news (AIDSFlash) and events from the region, to share information on activities of APICT and the UNAIDS co-sponsors. AIDSFlash is a biweekly news service summarizing the HIV/AIDS press from over 20 regional sources. The electronic newsletter is sent to all networks supported by APICT and other interested networks/individuals.
- ***The ASEAN Task Force on AIDS E-Group (ATFOAnet)***: This e-group is jointly moderated by UNAIDS and the AIDS Division of Thailand's Ministry of Public Health. The group provides members of the ASEAN Taskforce on AIDS with a neutral space to discuss issues, identify possible solutions and share experiences and information.
- ***The Asian AIDS Information Network E-group (AAIN)***: This e-group brings together organizations that are sources of HIV/AIDS information to: share relevant information, experiences and resources between collaborating organizations; clearly define respective roles of individual resource centres, and to convey descriptions of services and materials available to clients in the region; reduce duplication efforts in the provision of HIV information and materials; and facilitate the referral of clients to appropriate sources of good-quality information and materials. UNAIDS is currently negotiating with a resource centre based within the region to take over responsibility for the network.
- ***The TB-HIV/AIDS E-Group***: This e-group was established to facilitate the sharing of information, ideas, suggestions and concerns about the growing threat of TB-HIV/AIDS and to explore ways of applying social mobilization to expand the response to this 'deadly duet'.
- ***SEA-AIDS***. Established in 1996, this network pioneered electronic communication in the HIV/AIDS field in Southeast Asia. The email discussion forum brings together around 2400 people and organizations working in and with Asian Nations in response to the epidemic. The forum enables people to discuss current HIV/AIDS issues, share experiences about what does and does not work in responding to the epidemic, as well as sharing news and forthcoming events.

Several lessons have been learnt thus far:

- Where there is a real perceived need to exchange information (i.e. small group of technical experts working on a common area of concern), the e-group system works.

- In some instances, the lack of communication may also be the result of the members themselves not being altogether sure how to use the technology.

- It is time-consuming to set up and maintain the database, links, document vault, etc. The e-group needs to be regularly updated to ensure that the member listing remains current. This is not necessarily the case in small technical e-groups. On the other hand, once this is in place it will be easier to maintain the e-group and keep it going.

- Although there are no cash costs apart from electricity and telephone access, a moderately skilled user is needed to moderate an e-group.

- Being web-based (except for the e-mail function) could present problems in those countries with inadequate telecommunications infrastructure. This is the case in many countries in Southern Africa and therefore accessing the webpage on e-groups, with all the functions and options available, could prove problematic.

- Some people just do not have the time to read through and respond to all the e-mails. Moderated e-mail forums may need to package messages into summaries, in order to present the information concisely and to reduce the time required to read them.

There are similarities among these lessons and those identified by others (Kumaranayake and Watts, 2000).

The Internet, like any information communication technology, is not essential to good information management. A TRN that has defined what information it needs and how information communication technology can be used to meet those needs will be far in advance of one which, in the absence of a thoughtful assessment of its objectives and needs, makes extensive use of computers, e-mail and the Internet. For a more detailed discussion of this, see Powell (1999).

5. An Agenda for Action

TRNs constitute a means of accelerating the spread of effective responses to HIV/AIDS. TRNs are complex systems and present challenges in the areas of management, financing, monitoring and evaluation.

In the near term, the UNAIDS Secretariat will work with its Cosponsors, bilateral agencies and regional institutions to strengthen on-going efforts to support networking, using the following mutually reinforcing strategies:

- **Development of resource materials to improve networking.** The UNAIDS Secretariat will equip interested parties with guidelines and reference materials to help them establish and manage TRNs. Following the publication of this lead volume, case studies of promising networks will be published and disseminated. Products in the pipeline include case studies of the Asian Harm Reduction Network, the Regional AIDS Training Network in Africa, the Latin American and Caribbean Strategic Planning Network and InfoDev, the electronic connectivity initiative in Southeast Asia. In order to equip networks with tools for effective management, UNAIDS will synthesize methodological experiences from these case studies into a single volume on the monitoring and evaluation of TRNs.

  As countries intensify their programmes of action against HIV/AIDS, there is a growing need for rapid access to skilled persons to support programme development and implementation. In response to this need, and with the endorsement of cosponsors and partner agencies, the UNAIDS Secretariat is developing a Directory of Technical and Managerial Resources, starting with those working on or in Africa. Version 1 of the Directory will be published in the last quarter of 2000. Validated data in subsequent versions will be available on diskette and the UNAIDS website by mid-2001. The Directory is expected to improve networking by making it easier for managers and analysts to identify institutions and persons with whom they might wish to establish professional contacts on a given subject.

- **Expanding the knowledge base.** As political support for HIV/AIDS programmes grows, the UNAIDS Secretariat will explore opportunities to leverage such political support for increased funding. For example, the UNAIDS Secretariat is working with partner institutions, including the World Bank and USAID, to develop a toolkit on Debt-for-AIDS (Box 11). As more funds become available for HIV/AIDS control, the concern in many countries will shift from that of a lack of resources to that of effective programming and efficient use of resources. In recognition of this, UNAIDS is working to equip managers of National AIDS Control Programmes with tools and techniques for efficient allocation of resources. A new training module on priority-setting within HIV/AIDS programmes, targeted towards analysts and managers of national programmes and NGOs, will be launched in the last quarter of 2000. These training materials will strengthen the activities of AIDS strategic planning networks in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

- **Initiating and supporting networks.** The UNAIDS Secretariat and Cosponsors will step up its support for existing networks and encourage the formation of new ones, with an emphasis on their potential to affect the course of the epidemic. Such support could include technical inputs, start-up funds (usually modest and specifically designed to leverage larger resources from other sources), advocacy and information dissemination. A promising example is the Strategic Planning Network for Western and Central Africa, launched in Ouagadougou in August 2000.

- **Facilitating communication for networking.** In addition to the electronic discussion forums, UNAIDS is developing an electronic workspace (eWorkspace) dedicated to capacity-building and technical resource strengthening for HIV/AIDS programmes at the sub-regional and regional levels. The prototype is focused on Africa. This eWorkspace is a tool to develop, document and disseminate timely methods and examples in response to specific needs for technical support at the country and regional levels. It will draw on expertise from UNAIDS Cosponsors, regional institutions, partner agencies and client countries. The Africa eWorkspace was launched in October 2000.

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Notes

Notes

The Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) is the leading advocate for global action on HIV/AIDS. It brings together seven UN agencies in a common effort to fight the epidemic: the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the United Nations International Drug Control Programme (UNDCP), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the World Health Organization (WHO) and the World Bank.

UNAIDS both mobilizes the responses to the epidemic of its seven cosponsoring organizations and supplements these efforts with special initiatives. Its purpose is to lead and assist an expansion of the international response to HIV on all fronts: medical, public health, social, economic, cultural, political and human rights. UNAIDS works with a broad range of partners – governmental and NGO, business, scientific and lay – to share knowledge, skills and best practice across boundaries.

Produced with environment-friendly materials

Networks assist in building local technical capacity, expanding national and regional advocacy, sharing of information, building peer support and facilitating collective action. Effective networks can strengthen HIV prevention efforts on the ground and influence policy development at regional and national levels. This new title provides practical guidance to those who seek to improve their networking skills. It will also be essential reading for groups of practitioners wishing to establish AIDS technical networks in specific geographical or thematic areas.

Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS

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