



Date: 19 November 2003

To: All United Nations Resident Coordinators and Heads of United Nations System Agencies and Organizations at Country Level

Subject: Operationalizing a Strengthened United Nations System Response to HIV/AIDS at Country Level

Mark Malloch Brown

From: Mark Malloch Brown
Chair

For nearly two decades, the United Nations has been in the forefront of the international response to the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Increasingly, the United Nations is aligning its activities with the priorities defined by the Millennium Declaration and by the global conferences of the past decade, including the goal to halt and reverse the HIV/AIDS epidemic. With the creation of the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) and guided further by UN reform efforts initiated by the Secretary-General, much has been achieved to ensure effective coordination and action among the various United Nations entities working on HIV/AIDS.

In December 2002, the Programme Coordinating Board (PCB) of UNAIDS endorsed five cross-cutting functions to shape its contributions in meeting the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and United Nations General Assembly Special Session on HIV/AIDS (UNGASS) goals, and to guide its actions at country, regional and global levels: 1) leadership and advocacy for effective action on the epidemic; 2) strategic information required to guide the efforts of partners; 3) tracking, monitoring and evaluation of the epidemic and actions responding to it; 4) civil society engagement and partnership development; and 5) financial, technical and political resource mobilization.

While important progress has been achieved, both the Secretary-General and UNAIDS Governing Board have recognized the need for specific improvements in strengthening and intensifying UN country action and support on HIV/AIDS. All members of the Chief Executives Board (CEB) are strongly committed to strengthening results at country level and assisting Member States to meet the growing challenge of HIV/AIDS. This communication provides guidance to UN Country Teams in this regard.

1. The Resident Coordinator system is the lynchpin of field coordination, and continues to serve as the foundation of the United Nations system response to HIV/AIDS at country level. The Resident Coordinator, in partnership with the heads of agencies, is responsible for the effectiveness of the United Nations system's activities on HIV/AIDS and ensuring that its combined resources are put to best use.
2. The United Nations Theme Group on HIV/AIDS is a forum to plan, manage and monitor a coordinated UN response to HIV/AIDS. Country representatives of all United Nations entities are expected to meet regularly as members of the United Nations Theme Group on HIV/AIDS.

Through a collegial process among UN Country Team members, the Resident Coordinator will ensure designation of a country representative --- on the basis of proven commitment, capacity, and availability --- to serve as Theme Group Chair, ideally for two years. With delegation of authority from the UN Resident Coordinator, the Theme Group Chair provides leadership and guidance for effective joint UN action on HIV/AIDS. This responsibility will be included in his/her annual work plan of key deliverables, and the Chair's performance will be reviewed and be part of his/her annual institutional appraisal. While rotation of the Chair is desirable, the primary concern must remain the proven dedication and commitment of the individual to the issue of HIV/AIDS.

The Resident Coordinator remains ultimately responsible for the overall functioning and effectiveness of the UN Theme Group, as well as promoting the mainstreaming of HIV/AIDS into all development programmes. Given these key responsibilities and the considerable time that the tasks of the Chair demand, it is anticipated that the UN Resident Coordinator would serve as Theme Group Chair only under exceptional circumstances. The UNDP Deputy Resident Representative may be designated as Chairperson.

3. Consistent with the UN mandate to build national capacity, the UN Country Team should promote a broad-based, multisectoral partnership forum on HIV/AIDS. This forum should be led by government and include civil society, people living with HIV/AIDS, private sector, and other key stakeholders. Although UN Theme Groups have often grown into such forums (e.g. expanded theme groups), the focus of the UN must remain on bolstering government leadership to assume responsibility for national coordination. Development of an effective partnership forum does not negate the need for all United Nations entities to meet regularly as members of the United Nations Theme Group on HIV/AIDS.
4. The UNAIDS Country Coordinator (UCC) operates within the Resident Coordinator system to support the work of the UN Country Team. The UCC is a member of the full UN Country Team and participates in all UN Country Team meetings, except on those specific occasions when the Resident Coordinator decides that the senior management group (i.e., accredited representatives of the UN system organizations) needs to meet alone.

The primary role of the UCC is to facilitate and support a joint UN response at country level. Working from a strong UN platform, the UCC serves to strengthen the links between the UN system, government, civil society, and people living with HIV/AIDS. This includes facilitating United Nations system support to effective management and use of resources (including the Global Fund), through building partnerships, brokering technical support, and strengthening monitoring and evaluation. The UCC is recruited by the UNAIDS Secretariat based on a competency framework which emphasizes leadership qualities, interpersonal, facilitation, analysis, presentation and writing skills, and is assigned to a country in consultation with the Resident Coordinator and Theme Group Chair. In accordance with WHO procedures, the Performance Evaluation Report of the UCC is completed by the UNAIDS Secretariat, based on inputs from the Resident Coordinator and from the UN Theme Group Chair, who provide day-to-day supervision.

5. UNAIDS will reinforce the capacity of the UN Resident Coordinator system in specific areas as highlighted in the UNAIDS PCB meeting of December 2002. Consequently, additional staff will be assigned to priority countries to fulfill the critical core functions of the Joint Programme, specifically on the areas of partnership building, resource mobilization and tracking, and monitoring and evaluation. Decisions on placement of these staff will be made in consultation with the Resident Coordinator and Theme Group Chair in each country.
6. The UN Country Team is expected to use key UN system development instruments --- the UN Common Country Assessment (CCA) and the UN Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF) and its Results Matrix --- to ensure its development support on HIV/AIDS is more strategic and focused on meeting MDGs and UNGASS goals. The protection and promotion of human rights should be seen as central to these activities. Concerted effort should be made to align the timing of the CCA and UNDAF process, and its targets and content, with those of the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) and other relevant development instruments whenever possible, in order to reduce transaction costs for developing country governments. The UN Country Team's joint programme on HIV/AIDS will be captured and periodically updated in a unified UN implementation support plan based on the UNDAF Results Matrix and reflecting national needs and priorities.
7. The UN Country Team is expected to fully implement the UN System Personnel Policy on HIV/AIDS and the ILO Code of Practice on HIV/AIDS and the World of Work. This commitment includes a policy of non-discriminatory employment and ensuring all personnel are provided with adequate information and access to medical care and counseling.
8. The UN Country Team is expected to implement the UN learning strategy on HIV/AIDS. This includes learning related to HIV/AIDS in the UN workplace, as well as ensuring that professional staff are competent to implement initiatives related to supporting national responses to HIV/AIDS.
9. Finally, improving accountability is a key objective of the UN Secretary-General's reform initiative. To underline the importance of results at the country level by the UN system, the UN Theme Group on HIV/AIDS should provide a regular report on progress of the UN implementation support plan as part of the UN Resident Coordinator's Annual Report. This annual report --- for which separate guidance will be provided by UNAIDS and UNDG --- will be synthesized by the UNAIDS Secretariat and reported on to the UNAIDS' Programme Coordinating Board.

The need for an effective UN system response to the HIV/AIDS pandemic has never been more acutely felt than it is today. The strategies we pursue rely on coordinated and increasingly joint action among all of us, and we urge your continued support and renewed effort in this regard.