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Fact Sheet

HIV/AIDS—a governance challenge

HIV/AIDS sets in motion a vicious cycle. By killing people in their most productive years, it increases poverty, reverses progress in education, lowers labour productivity, threatens food security and slows economic growth. Those setbacks, in turn, fuel the epidemic and undermine prevention and treatment efforts.

TACKLING THE AIDS EPIDEMIC SUCCESSFULLY DEPENDS on how well national responses are managed and whether people and communities can be mobilized around the common aim of controlling the epidemic. In short, HIV/AIDS poses a complex governance challenge.

- An effective response to HIV/AIDS has to achieve three basic objectives: it must reduce the number of new infections; it should expand access to care and treatment for people living with HIV/AIDS; and it needs to soften the impact of the epidemic on social and economic development. Usually, this requires intensifying national poverty reduction efforts and providing support for those worst affected.
- Strong social and political mobilization is needed at family, community and national levels in order to reach these objectives. That requires highly effective forms of governance. There is no single blueprint for success, but lessons learned over the past two decades show that well-governed national responses share some basic principles.

Ensuring effective governance

- Political will, vision and leadership are essential, especially at the highest level of government. Such leadership should recognize that practical steps must be taken to allocate national resources to HIV/AIDS-related priorities and to marshal institutions and actors beyond the health sector. The response in countries such as Uganda and Thailand benefited greatly from strong leadership in the early stages of the epidemic, making it possible to mobilize communities, governments and civil society groups.
- Strategic national AIDS plans are another key ingredient of effective governance. The best of these plans cover a variety of sectors, and include prevention, care and treatment, as well as measures that soften the impact of the epidemic. They are designed to achieve clear targets and are marked by firm lines of accountability. They are coordinated and funded at the highest level of government, but also promote strong community participation. Such large-scale multisectoral planning provides the framework for harmonizing the activities of diverse partners.

- In countries with effective responses, all departments of government and civil society have been spurred into action. Successful governance of an HIV/AIDS response demands that the widest range of government departments, civil society groups and the private sector collaborate across different sectors and at various levels. Senegal, for example, has managed to contain the epidemic because it nurtured partnerships between women's groups, faith-based organizations, district authorities, government agencies and private sector entities.
- All sectors of government (and not just those explicitly tasked with health issues) have a key role to play. Labour departments can promote workplace prevention and care programmes in the private sector, for instance. Education ministries can introduce AIDS education for school-children and their parents. Agriculture departments can deploy their networks of extension workers to help communities cope with the impact of the epidemic.
- Responses work best when they are decentralized and scaled up. In the context of the epidemic, effective governance therefore depends on governments' abilities to mobilize and support local-level action. District and municipal authorities are most effective when they receive the means to scale up their activities and work hand in hand with communities that are at the front line of prevention and care. Botswana, Ghana and Laos are good examples of special efforts being made to boost provincial- and district-level strategic planning and implementation capacity.
- Governments with a strong enough capacity to plan, implement and manage their strategies have been shown to achieve the strongest successes against the epidemic. This goes beyond the question of sufficient finances. Sharp increases in funding for HIV/AIDS work demands that governments and communities are able to absorb that assistance. Special efforts are therefore needed to strengthen accountability frameworks, managerial capacities and monitoring, evaluation and budgeting systems. Without such measures, funds cannot be rapidly disbursed, nor can programmes be kept in effective operation.
- One of the primary lessons learned over the past 20 years is that HIV/AIDS must be at the top of national development agendas. The epidemic is not a separate, discreet matter. National development plans and poverty reduction strategies that take full account of the need to slow the spread of the epidemic and cope with its impact achieve the most success. Failing that, the resources allocated from national budgets to prevention and care will remain inadequate.
- In countries with effective responses, HIV/AIDS priorities are earnestly debated in the national parliament, and carry the full support of the cabinet and ministry of finance. This is particularly important when a country chooses to allocate debt relief savings—a valuable chance to increase the funds going towards an AIDS response. Among others, Burkina Faso and Cameroon are examples of countries that have effectively done this.

Global support for national strategies

- HIV/AIDS poses a unique challenge. While it requires a serious public health response, it also demands much broader action. All sectors and levels of government and civil society must be mobilized if prevention efforts are to succeed and the epidemic's effects are to be reduced.
- But countries cannot carry the burden alone. Rather than back fragmented projects, global funding must support large-scale and comprehensive national strategic plans that cover the gamut of interventions needed to control the epidemic. Success then hinges on how well countries manage to govern their own responses, and on the support of donors, the United Nations, multilateral lending institutions and international civil society organizations.