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PROGRAMME COORDINATING BOARD

***Ad hoc* thematic meeting**

Nairobi, 16-18 November 1997

Provisional agenda item 2(b)

THE UNITED NATIONS SYSTEM AT COUNTRY LEVEL:

Meeting the challenge of HIV/AIDS

Executive summary

UNAIDS is coordinated at country level through UN Theme Groups on HIV/AIDS, which support countries' efforts to expand their response to HIV. The PCB has requested a review of the strengths and weaknesses of these coordination mechanisms, and greater clarity about their role.

An initial review and consultations with Theme Group members and UNAIDS field staff show that Theme Groups are functioning well in several areas. The Cosponsors have chosen to vary Theme Group composition and working methods from country to country, depending on the local situation. Many have set up successful Technical Working Groups with broad membership, leaving the Theme Group itself to concentrate on developing policy, advocating at the highest level of government for a strengthened response to HIV, and mobilizing resources from a range of partners.

The most successful UN responses to HIV/AIDS at country level are characterized by strong partnership between Theme Group members, national governments, international donors and civil society. These partnerships enrich the response to other aspects of development as well as HIV – Theme Group members need support from their organizations in dedicating time and energy to maintaining such partnerships.

The diversity of approach between countries provides many examples of strong responses. The UNAIDS Secretariat is actively supporting an exchange of information and experience between Theme Groups, so that they can build on one another's successes. The Secretariat has also published a draft resource guide collecting together examples of best practice in many areas of Theme Group management.

In some areas, coordinated work is hampered by the organizational structures of the various agencies involved in the joint UN response to HIV. All agencies, including the UNAIDS Secretariat, need to make a clearer commitment to allowing Theme Groups and their national partners to coordinate activities at country level.

The creation of UNAIDS raised expectations for more resources for the fight against HIV. These expectations have often not been visibly met, partly because of institutional difficulties in channelling funds to a joint response. In some countries, cost-sharing mechanisms have contributed greatly to a unified UN response to HIV. Devolving decision-making about spending to country level would increase Theme Groups' ability to meet local priorities.

Action required at this meeting

The PCB is requested to affirm support for the Theme Group system as the coordinating mechanism for UNAIDS in countries, and to encourage a clear commitment to working through that system from all Cosponsors.

Guidance is sought on how UNAIDS can best meet the needs of Theme Groups as they work to coordinate UN activity in support of country responses to HIV.



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Contents

I.	Introduction.....	2
II.	Strong first steps.....	2
III.	Meeting continuing challenges.....	4
IV.	Monitoring progress.....	8

I. Introduction

1. The HIV epidemic has many faces. It thrives on social inequality and economic instability and spreads through behaviours that are deeply rooted in culture and tradition. The Member States of the UN have recognized that many skills are needed in addressing the root causes of the epidemic as well as its immediate impact. They have recognized, too, that several UN agencies have skills that could help countries respond to the causes and impact of the epidemic, and have responded by bringing those agencies together as Cosponsors of UNAIDS.

2. Each of the six Cosponsoring Organizations has different strengths, different spheres of influence and action, and different partners at country level. By bringing them together in a single forum, the Member States expect more effective support for countries in slowing the spread of HIV and reducing its impact on individuals and their communities.

3. At country level, UN Theme Groups on HIV/AIDS coordinate activities of the Cosponsors and other members of the UN system as they combine their strengths in the response to HIV. Theme Groups are not operational entities. Rather, they set policy for the UN response to HIV which is then implemented by the individual Cosponsors and other agencies represented in the group. The Theme Groups provide a structure to enable the various agencies to:

- assist governments in identifying priority needs and planning national responses to HIV
- coordinate policy of UN agencies in the field of HIV/AIDS, ensuring that policies meet the strategic priorities set by the country
- encourage members to increase support, funding and activity in the field of HIV
- provide technical support to partners in the national response
- expand partnerships between groups whose strengths can contribute to the national response
- provide a forum for the exchange of information, allowing all partners in the response to learn from shared experience

II. Strong first steps

A growing commitment to work in unison on HIV

4. In some countries, UN staff have responded actively to the call from the Member States to work together with other agencies to support the national response to HIV. Since the beginning of 1996, UN Theme Groups on HIV/AIDS have been established in 132 countries. Although a few of these groups have remained moribund, an evaluation of work in the first year indicates that a large majority have agreed objectives and an active exchange of information and experience. A growing number are developing plans for coordinated action at technical and programme level.

Joint advocacy

5. Through the Theme Groups, Cosponsors increasingly ensure that they speak with a common voice when they communicate with partners outside the UN system. A unified message focused on areas of national priority can be extremely helpful in encouraging different partners in government to pool their energies and resources in responding to HIV. In Vietnam, the heads of agencies in the Theme

Group together meet the Deputy Prime Minister to discuss subjects such as prostitution and illegal drug use which may be difficult for a single agency to bring up in

isolation. In Mozambique, the Theme Group has met with the President and Prime Minister to promote an expanded response to HIV. The Government subsequently included AIDS mitigation activities in its investment plans and enshrined human rights issues in labour law.

6. Annual public information and awareness campaigns around a specific theme bring Cosponsors together in common advocacy efforts at national as well as international level. The 1997 World AIDS Campaign on Children Living in a World with AIDS has been actively supported by Theme Groups in a large number of countries. Their efforts have resulted in a higher profile for the problems faced by infected children and orphans, their families and communities, as well as a better awareness of how the UN is supporting countries in their response. World AIDS day, on 1 December, provides another focal point for UN advocacy efforts.

Situation-specific responses

7. One of the great strengths of the Theme Group approach is that it allows the UN system and its partners in each country to work in ways that best suit the needs and situations of that country. Theme Groups set their own agenda and their composition, tasks, and working methods vary widely from country to country. In Ethiopia, for example, the Cosponsors are joined by the Ministries of Health, Education, Labour and Social Affairs as well as by UNHCR, OAU and the ECA. In Ecuador, major bi-lateral donors, the Netherlands and the United States are represented, along with FAO and UNIFEM. In some countries, Theme Groups that consist largely of Cosponsors have supported the creation of Technical Working Groups with membership that spans the national response. In Venezuela, an NGO network, the National AIDS Programme and European Union representatives work together on a technical committee with the UN agency focal points for HIV/AIDS.

Identifying priorities, planning strategically

8. Theme Groups in many countries have been actively supporting governments as they plan to expand their response to HIV. In over 20 countries so far, the institutions represented in the Theme Groups have encouraged wide participation in the planning process, so that every sector is able to identify its needs and contribute its skills and resources to the response. They have contributed information and technical skills to a thorough analysis of the situations that promote the spread of HIV at country level and the needs of affected communities. Theme Group members are supporting governments in setting priorities for responding to the epidemic and in formulating strategies to meet those priorities in countries as diverse as Brazil, Cambodia, Namibia and Papua New Guinea. The coordination of specific support to a government-led strategic planning process will be a major continuing focus of Theme Group collaboration with countries.

Expanding resources across sectors

9. Each of the Cosponsors has access to partners who are potentially important to the national response but who may be only marginally involved as yet. In many Theme Groups, members work within the framework of the national priorities to encourage increased involvement by their partners in different sectors. In Laos, Theme Group members recognizing

the vulnerability to HIV infection of migrant workers on large infrastructure projects have worked to improve the situation in partnership with private sector companies and NGOs. After discussion with UN agencies represented in Theme Groups, private contractors have established AIDS education programmes in their workforce, using materials prepared for them by an NGO.

Sharing experience through regional networks

10. In the first two years of the development of the joint UN response to HIV, much has been learned about what works and what doesn't. Several Theme Groups, supported by the UNAIDS Secretariat, have taken the initiative of sharing their experiences through regional networks. In West Africa, Theme Groups have initiated country visits to exchange experience and support one another's efforts. In parts of Asia they have facilitated exchanges between government staff to the same end. In South-East Asia, the UNAIDS' Inter-Country Team supports SEA-AIDS, an interactive electronic network through which Cosponsors and others can exchange information about issues of interest. UNAIDS' Country Programme Advisers are active in supporting Theme Groups as they strengthen their own activities by incorporating strategies and mechanisms that have succeeded elsewhere.

Leading the way in UN reform

11. The success of many of the UN Theme Groups on HIV/AIDS demonstrates the value of unity of purpose, approach and action within the UN system. UN agencies, coordinated by Theme Groups, have shown that by working together to reduce the spread and impact of HIV, they achieve a critical mass that can have more impact than a host of separate initiatives.

12. The unified approach exemplified by successful Theme Groups on HIV/AIDS is strongly supported by the UN Secretary-General's proposals for a UN Development Assistance Framework, which envisages joint assessment and planning of UN development work. Indeed, the Secretary-General has proposed that the Theme Group approach pioneered for HIV by UNAIDS' Cosponsors be repeated in other areas of development.

III. Meeting continuing challenges

13. In the first two years of Theme Group activity, then, there have been a number of important successes. But much remains to be done. The PCB in April 1997 identified several areas where progress was needed. For instance, UN agency staff may not know what is expected of them in responding to HIV. Many do not have the time or interest to work on HIV-related initiatives, or refuse to contribute financially to joint initiatives in this area. Those who are more active may be insufficiently rewarded for the work they do. The decentralized structure of some Cosponsoring Organizations can prevent policy commitments made by headquarters from being translated into work in the field. Different agencies are sometimes protective of their traditional turf and are reluctant to work more closely with other UN agencies in their area of expertise. The limited funding provided by the UNAIDS Secretariat means funds must be raised at country level, where both Cosponsors and bi-lateral donors are likely to have priorities other than HIV. Mechanisms for funding partnered projects are limited.

14. These are just some of the continuing challenges facing those who believe UN agencies working together will have a greater impact in supporting the national response to HIV than UN agencies working separately. A recent review of the strengths and weaknesses of the joint UN response to HIV at country level shows that these difficulties can be overcome. The challenge for UNAIDS is to expand existing successes to a greater number of countries.

Theme Groups need a clear idea of their roles and responsibilities

Gaps in understanding

15. UNAIDS, an association of UN agencies with an interest in HIV supported by a small coordinating Secretariat, remains ill-understood by some people, even within its own membership. UN staff meeting urgent needs in their own areas of development expertise may not immediately see how their work is relevant to HIV. And if they do not see how their skills are necessary to the national response, they are unlikely to dedicate time, effort, budget and other resources to that response through an active participation in the UN Theme Group on HIV/AIDS.

16. There are a number of fora through which the UNAIDS Cosponsors and Secretariat are promoting understanding of the importance of all contributions to the response. The regular briefing and training sessions given by the UN Staff College at Turin are supplemented with special briefings on the work of UNAIDS. The Secretariat publishes information on areas of importance to the response through its Best Practice Collection and circulates them to all members of Theme Groups.

A two-way flow of information

17. The UNAIDS Secretariat makes an effort to brief resident coordinators, and hopes to do more in terms of informing Cosponsor staff about their role in supporting global and national responses to HIV. Even when they are aware of the global role, staff and managers in headquarters sometimes have no clear idea of how UNAIDS functions within a country. Unless there is a two-way flow of information about Theme Group experiences, the opportunity for regional or global managers to pass on success stories to their staff in other countries will be lost. Some Cosponsors provide the chance to address this problem by requiring field staff to include HIV activities in their regular reports to headquarters.

Guidance on roles and responsibilities

18. The strength of the Theme Group system is that Cosponsors and their partners can respond in ways that best suit country needs. It is difficult, then, to define categorically how a Theme Group should be constituted or managed. However there are general principles which should be considered in setting up and managing Theme Groups. The PCB in April 1997 expressed a need for clearer guidance on these principles. In response to this request, the UNAIDS Secretariat is preparing a draft Resource Guide for UN Theme Groups on HIV/AIDS, "The Hows and Whys of Working Together on

HIV/AIDS". The guide covers many areas of Theme Group functioning, giving examples of practices that work well and raising key issues for consideration in the country context.

A clear division of labour

19. Some Theme Groups have run into difficulty because heads of agencies have busy schedules and face competing priorities – they are rarely able to dedicate time to detailed work on HIV. One solution that has emerged in many countries is the formation of a Technical Working Group on HIV/AIDS. The Theme Group works on setting policy direction, developing common positions for advocacy, and involving high-level counterparts in the national response. The Technical Working Group, which may involve far more national and international partners from outside the UN system, works to develop activities to implement that policy.

20. The UNAIDS Secretariat is documenting the success of different management models developed by Theme Groups – many of the lessons learned are collected in the draft Resource Guide. Through its Inter-Country Teams, UNAIDS also actively supports the exchange of information and experience between Theme Groups at regional level.

Cosponsors can do more to support active Theme Group membership

Commitment to a coordinated response in countries

21. Some Theme Group members have difficulty taking an active part in a coordinated response to HIV because the commitments they make to their partner agencies at country level are contradicted or circumvented by decisions taken by global or regional headquarters. UN agencies will be able more effectively to coordinate their support to the national response if information about all Cosponsor activities at country level are channelled through the Theme Group. This requires a clear commitment from the UNAIDS Secretariat as well as all Cosponsors to allow Theme Groups to coordinate their activities in countries. In the more centralized agencies, this commitment may come from headquarters. In those with decentralized management, it should be shared by each regional office.

Support, recognition and reward for Theme Group work

22. While support for the Theme Group system endorsed by the Member States exists in all the Cosponsoring Organizations, the immediate demands on overstretched field staff may prevent their full participation in a coordinated response to HIV. A clearer recognition – both in job descriptions and in staff evaluation – of time and effort spent building an effective coordinated response to the epidemic is needed if staff are to give the joint UN response to HIV the attention it needs to function well.

Partnerships are the key to wider action

Partnership between UN agencies

23. Each of the Cosponsors has a comparative advantage in attacking the situations that make people vulnerable to HIV and its impact, and all have long histories of working in the field of human development. In some cases, there are areas of overlap as well as complementarities in their mandates

and activities. Developing a coordinated UN approach to HIV within a country involves establishing partnerships that avoid duplication while taking advantage of differing

strengths. Recognition of each other's strengths means seizing opportunities for collaboration and allowing other agencies to assume a lead role where they are best placed to do so.

Partnerships with government

24. The main work of Theme Groups is to support the capacity of governments to lead a national response to HIV. In their years of development work in support of national administrations, UN agencies have developed strong relationships with various institutions of government. By involving their counterparts in UN activities on HIV and by inviting them to join Theme Groups or Technical Working Groups, Cosponsor representatives can encourage commitment from many sectors of government to the response to HIV.

25. One area in which Theme Group partnerships with government have been influential is the field of strategic planning. In several countries, Theme Group members have been able to encourage their counterparts to participate in a planning process spanning across all sectors of government and society.

Partnerships with other major contributors to the national response

26. Contributions from international donors outside of the UN system are often of central importance to the national response; in many countries, international NGOs and bi-lateral donors participate in Theme Groups or Technical Working Groups. The greater the unity of the UN response, the greater the incentive for bi-lateral and other donors to join forces in a common effort to support an expanded national response. UNAIDS strongly encourages partnerships between the UN system and other donors.

Partnership with civil society

27. Historically, many UN agencies have concentrated their efforts on working with governments. There is an increasing recognition, however, that development at once strengthens and is strengthened by a strong civil society. Several of the UNAIDS Cosponsors are placing more emphasis than ever on supporting communities' capacity to help themselves. Theme Groups and Technical Working Groups have in some countries been strengthened by the committed participation of people living with HIV/AIDS, community development organizations or private and professional groupings.

Coordinated action depends on resource mobilization

Bringing resources in to the national response

28. At the outset of UNAIDS, it was decided that the Programme would not, by and large, be a funding body. Rather, the UN Theme Groups on HIV/AIDS would help countries to mobilize funds and resources for the response to HIV from multilateral, bi-lateral and domestic sources, including from the UN agencies that make up the core of the Theme Groups. In some countries, such as Guatemala,

Honduras, Laos and Namibia, active Theme Groups have indeed been able to bring substantial new resources into the national response. They have interested new donors in HIV issues and some have succeeded in encouraging private companies to contribute supplies, skills and manpower as well as cash to HIV activities.

29. “Resources” have traditionally been understood in terms of funding; part of the brief of Theme Groups is to help leverage other types of resources from the private sector and the community, and to support the more efficient use of existing resources. These types of contributions are harder to measure than cash donations, so success in mobilizing them may be underestimated.

Finding funding mechanisms that work

30. Despite a few successes it is clear that in many countries Theme Group efforts to coordinate the UN response to HIV have not yet contributed measurably to increasing the resources available to countries. This is partly because joint UN mechanisms to fund support for an expanded response to HIV are weak. Theme Groups themselves do not implement policy, nor do they generally administer funds except to support their own activities. There are often no clear channels for donors wishing to contribute to the activities coordinated by the Theme Group. In some cases Cosponsor Organizations are reluctant to contribute to the joint UN support for a national response to HIV, particularly if they fear they will get no credit for their contribution.

31. The disbursement of project development funds from the UNAIDS Secretariat remains problematic. Systems for streamlining approval and disbursement procedures for project funding are currently being developed, with many options under active consideration. One such option might be to allow Theme Groups to make funding decisions directly.

Solutions in the administration of pooled funds

32. In some countries, Theme Group members have resolved joint or coordinated funding difficulties by the creation of a cost-sharing mechanism – Laos, Namibia and Tanzania are examples. In Pakistan, UNDP administers, through its existing mechanisms, funds contributed not only by a number of Cosponsors but also by bi-lateral partners including Japan and Norway. All contributing partners have voting rights in the Theme Group along with the National AIDS Programme, and together they determine how the money is spent, and by whom, to meet national priorities. Although this system has met some resistance from agency accountants who are unwilling to disburse money while giving up their own bureaucratic controls and reporting mechanisms, it has several advantages. It allows for the administration of funds without the creation of any extra mechanisms and reduces the duplication of effort that would have been involved in monitoring and evaluating separately-funded programmes.

IV. Monitoring progress

33. The first two years of Theme Group activity are encouraging, with a few notable successes and constant progress as lessons are learned. The UNAIDS Secretariat intends to support the development of a coordinated UN response to HIV by sharing the lessons of success and helping Theme Groups avoid known pitfalls. To this end, a system of assessment has begun.

34. The assessment for 1996 – the first year of Theme Group work – was completed earlier this year. It developed a framework for measuring the progress of Theme Groups through broad phases of activity, assessing the extent of activities in operationalizing the Theme Group,

exchanging information between members, establishing coordinated action and establishing joint action. Theme Groups were asked to say whether they had completed specific activities, were in the course of implementing them, or had not initiated that activity. Scores were composed not in order to compare the performance of different Theme Groups (which work in situations that are often not comparable) but in order to establish a baseline for tracking the progress of individual Theme Groups over time.

35. While the first assessment sought to measure what has been achieved so far, subsequent rounds will aim not just to measure what has worked and what has not, but to analyse the reason for successes and continued obstacles. It will be repeated in early 1998, and is planned annually thereafter.