

PROGRAMME COORDINATING BOARD

UNAIDS/PCB(31)/12.22

Issue date: 01 November 2012

THIRTY-FIRST MEETING

DATE: 11-13 December 2012

VENUE: Executive Board Room, WHO, Geneva

Agenda item 6

Monitoring and Evaluation Reference Group (MERG)

Additional documents for this item: *none*

Action required at this meeting - the Programme Coordinating Board is invited to: take note of the report.

BACKGROUND

1. The UNAIDS Monitoring and Evaluation Reference Group (MERG) was first established in 1998 to harmonize HIV/AIDS monitoring and evaluation approaches at the global, regional, and country levels and to generate reliable and timely information on the epidemic and the response. Since its establishment, the MERG has played a leading role in global monitoring and evaluation (M&E) for the HIV response, including establishing and refining global indicators and tracking progress towards meeting the commitments of the 2001 United Nations General Assembly Special Session on HIV/AIDS. Furthermore, the MERG has played a key role in setting international M&E standards and guidelines and strengthening coordination between its members.
2. During 2010 and 2011, the changing global monitoring and evaluation landscape has led to discussions on how the MERG could play a greater strategic and priority setting role. In the past, the MERG membership was ad-hoc, with unclear selection criteria and unlimited duration of membership, making decision-making difficult and leading to calls for a more compact and fit-for-purpose MERG. Accordingly, an independent and external assessment of its role, structure and function was commissioned by UNAIDS¹.

EXTERNAL ASSESSMENT OF MERG AND FINDINGS

3. The consultancy firm Ernst and Young (E&Y) was selected to carry out this assessment which was structured into below listed four components. The rapidly evolving global M&E landscape was taken into consideration:
 - a) Strategic fit to meet global M&E needs,
 - b) Working effectively in partnership with others,
 - c) Institutional set-up and membership,
 - d) Performance management and accountability.
4. The methods used for data collection included a comprehensive desk review of relevant documents and a series of interviews with key stakeholders. In addition, semi-structured interviews with 28 key informants in the HIV and M&E arena were conducted between August and September 2011. The interviewees represented diversity in gender, geography, had representation from normative bodies, academia, civil society, donors and implementing agencies
5. At the end of 2011, the consultancy firm (E&Y) presented to UNAIDS their assessment report which focussed on the MERG's future role, mandate and structure². Current challenges identified included:
 - a structure and composition of the MERG that was sub-optimal for addressing new challenges like emergence of new stakeholders and shrinking HIV resources;
 - a relatively weak evaluation function compared to monitoring, with interviewees suggesting that impact evaluation needed strengthening; and,
 - a "MERG structure (that) was too abstract and not practical; it does not support policy making and decision making".

¹ UNAIDS. (2011, February 8). Assessment of the Effectiveness of the Global Monitoring and Evaluation Reference Group (MERG). Retrieved from <http://www.aidsspace.org/getDownload.php?id=1836>

² Ernst & Young. (2011, November). Assessment Of The Global Monitoring And Evaluation Reference Group. Retrieved from <http://www.aidsspace.org/getDownload.php?id=1833>

6. Hence, there was a desire to see a broadening of the role of the MERG from a purely technical body to a more rigorous and empowered mechanism that:
 - triggers and guides both policy and technical discussions around M&E of AIDS responses;
 - provides independent advice;
 - facilitates communication between main decision makers; and,
 - enables cooperation across a wide spectrum of stakeholders.
7. The recommendations called for a new strategic and independent global group able to respond to the changing global HIV and AIDS environment. Specifically it was recommended to:
 - reconstitute the MERG with a two tier structure: a strategic advisory and decision-making body, and a pool of experts for M&E harmonization and coordination activities;
 - ensure the rotation of chair and vice-chair roles between MERG members, excluding UNAIDS and ex-officio members (see paragraph 10), to ensure a larger degree of independence;
 - ensure the participation of UNAIDS cosponsors through a link with and representation of the Cosponsor Evaluation Working Group.

MERG TERMS OF REFERENCE AND STRUCTURE

8. The Terms of Reference for the new MERG were developed in line with the assessment report recommendations³. Its main role is to help set the global HIV evaluation agenda and provide strategic advice that will meet the requirements of a rapidly evolving AIDS response, within a wider health and development arena.
9. The new MERG's structure consists of a "Strategic Body" which brings together influential partners, policy experts, and key thinkers in global HIV M&E. Through its credibility, composition and strategic work, it is envisaged to become a key source of advice for the main decision makers in the AIDS response.
10. MERG membership will be limited to a maximum of fourteen (14) including 10 regular (see below) and 4 ex officio members. Ex-officio members include UNAIDS as the Secretariat, the Chair of the UNAIDS Cosponsor Evaluation Working Group (CEWG), on a rotating basis, a representative of the GFATM Technical Evaluation Reference Group (TERG) and of the PEPFAR Scientific Advisory Board (SAB). Regular MERG members are appointed on a two year term, renewable once. The MERG chair and co-chair will be elected from among regular members.
11. The MERG will be supported by, and draw from the expertise of a broader pool of experts, the "MERG Network". The network will mainly consist of time limited, task oriented technical working groups that are established by the MERG. MERG Network members will be drawn from academia, private sector, multilateral and bilateral agencies, donor and recipient countries, non-governmental organizations and civil society on the basis of their expertise. Standing working groups that the MERG might (re-)establish include:
 - a) The Indicator Working Group,
 - b) a specific Impact Evaluation Working Group and, perhaps,

³ UNAIDS (2012) Monitoring and Evaluation Reference Group - Terms of Reference. Retrieved from <http://www.aidsspace.org/getDownload.php?id=1834>

c) a specific Task Team to look at M&E system integration issues.

The MERG may decide to set up additional time-limited working groups as required.

12. The MERG has an important role in ensuring the robustness of the monitoring and evaluation of UNAIDS 2012-2015 Unified Budget, Results and Accountability Framework (UBRAF). Additionally, the MERG is expected to provide independent advice to the Cosponsor Evaluation Working Group (CEWG) on global M&E indicators and methodology to guide monitoring and reporting on the 2012-2015 UBRF – see UNAIDS/PCB(30)/12.9. The first annual progress report on the implementation of the UBRF will be presented to the Programme Coordinating Board at its 32nd meeting in June 2013.
13. UNAIDS hosts the secretariat of the MERG. The MERG Secretariat coordinates development of a yearly work plan, and prepares and convenes the biannual MERG meeting. The MERG Secretariat may assist in the identification of MERG Network experts, and present its recommendations to the MERG for review and decision. The MERG reports to the UNAIDS Executive Director. Relevant updates of MERG activities will be included in the Executive Director's report to the Programme Coordinating Board of UNAIDS.

MERG SELECTION PROCESS AND CONSULTATIONS

14. Based on the assessment findings and in line with the MERG Terms of Reference, UNAIDS invited expressions of interest for membership in the MERG. The Expression of Interest (Eoi), along with application material, and background information were distributed publicly on the UNAIDS web site on April 2nd, 2012⁴. The Eoi was advertised on UNAIDS' Twitter (over 47,000 tweets) and Facebook (over 36,000 followers) accounts. The Eoi was shared on the main UN Procurement and Tendering solicitation pages. A request for nominations was also made to forty seven key experts, directors of global HIV programs, senior advisors and academics who had advised on the reform and reconstitution of the MERG.
15. The time-line for MERG membership applications closed on April 30th, 2012. Forty-three (43) complete applications were received in all. UNAIDS solicited for and recruited the assistance of an impartial and independent consultancy provider to assist in the MERG recruitment process in compliance with UN standards and recommendations of the assessment⁵. The consultancy firm screened the applicants for the strategic body of the MERG, and ranked and rated the applicants.
16. To consider the suitability of candidates to the MERG in the initial assignment of members to the strategic body. UNAIDS convened a panel of experts, called the MERG Selection Review Panel (MSRP)⁶. The MSRP is composed of the following members: the four (4) ex-officio members of the MERG, including representatives of: UNAIDS Secretariat, UNAIDS Cosponsors, GFATM TERG, PEPFAR SAB; two (2) independent, unaffiliated governance and policy experts in HIV/AIDS, one (1) representative of the UNAIDS PCB Bureau, and one (1) Civil Society representative.

⁴ UNAIDS. (2012, April). Membership in the Monitoring and Evaluation Reference Group strategic body. Retrieved from UNAIDS Tenders:

<http://www.unaids.org/en/aboutunaids/workatunaidssecretariat/requestforproposals/2012/name.68318.en.asp>

⁵ UNAIDS. (2012, April). Assessment of the applications for Monitoring and Evaluation Reference Group (MERG) membership. Retrieved from <http://www.aidsspace.org/getDownload.php?id=1837>

⁶ UNAIDS. (2012, May). MERG Selection Review Panel (MSRP) – Terms of Reference. Retrieved from <http://www.aidsspace.org/getDownload.php?id=1838>

17. The MSRP met on June 8th, 2012 and reviewed the external assessment of the candidates provided by the consultancy agency, including their ranking, qualifications, and match to the MERG Terms of Reference. Upon considering the external assessment, and deliberating on qualifications and candidates' fit for purpose, the MSRP recommended the appointment of ten candidates for membership in the MERG. The MSRP also recommended that special efforts be made to reach out to and recruit candidates from previously under-represented regions and constituencies in the rotation process of the MERG.
18. The results of the selection were presented to the UNAIDS Executive Director and were subsequently approved in July 2012⁷. The candidates were notified of their selection in the same month, and all confirmed their acceptance.

THE FIRST MEETING OF THE NEW MERG AND THEMES

19. The first meeting of the new MERG is planned for 20-21 November 2012. The specific objectives of the meeting will be:
 - a) to review past achievements and gaps in the M&E of the AIDS response within the context of the wider health and development evaluation landscape, and to identify priorities for the coming years,
 - b) to discuss and agree on the role of MERG in influencing the Global HIV agenda,
 - c) to familiarize members with the terms of reference, select leadership, define the modus operandi for functioning of the MERG and the technical working groups, and
 - d) to agree on elements of an annual MERG work plan.
20. Key outcomes and conclusions from the first meeting of the new MERG will be presented to the Programme Coordinating Board at its 31st meeting.

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⁷ UNAIDS. (2012, September). Monitoring & Evaluation Reference Group membership list. Retrieved from <http://www.aidsspace.org/getDownload.php?id=1839>