

Speech

UNAIDS and UN Reform: a test-case for a system-wide coherence in the United Nations

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**Dr Peter Piot,
UNAIDS Executive Director**

Thank you Minister Eler and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for hosting this event and Dr Zöpel and the German United Nations Association for organizing it. I am happy to be here to discuss these important and timely issues relating to UN reform.

This is a critical time for the UN, 60-plus years since its founding. The world's people expect more of the UN than ever before, especially because of diverse new challenges that demand a collective and often global response – in other words, that demand effective multilateralism.

And it is a critical time for the AIDS response globally with unprecedented opportunities but also emerging new challenges – so the need for UN leadership on tackling this challenge is as great as ever.

I am particularly pleased to have the opportunity to discuss these issues in Germany, as Germany is one of the world's strongest supporters of a more effective and accountable UN system, a UN system fit for the challenges of the 21st century.

Germany also has a wealth of useful experience in development cooperation including on AIDS. So, in the discussion period, I am looking forward to learning from the wealth of thinking that has been done in Germany on these matters. I learned a great deal already from reading the paper prepared by the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development on the reform of the UN' operational activities. I am pleased that I'm able to contribute to the discussion in Germany in advance of your taking over the EU and G8 presidencies a few months from now.

First let me say that UN reform means many different things to many different people and that my perspective particularly focuses on the role of the UN in the development arena, in the social issues rather than, let us say, reform of the UN Security Council, the Human Rights Council and all that.

From the perspective of UNAIDS, I see reform really as maximizing the effectiveness of the international system to ensure more adequate support to meet the needs of countries in a rapidly changing global and regional environment. It is really a combination of being more relevant, more efficient, and more effective to the needs of countries and to see how the UN system can more effectively tackle new global issues as well as old global issues.

The true test is not reform for reform's sake, but reform that makes a difference to people on the ground. To be very frank, I have always avoided most of the meetings on reform that dealt with global discussions on mandates and all that because after having done that for one year I just did not see where it would end up, because certainly when we started with UNAIDS 10 years ago there was not a political will to move that agenda. I think that will is now much more present.

AIDS is a typical issue that requires a global approach. One cannot tackle the global AIDS epidemic today without a multilateral system – without a global system of governance, of setting certain norms, of standing up for basic principles and let us not forget that in the case of the UN system the foundational principles are those of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

I believe it is really in this case multilateral action that is going to be able to stop this dreadful epidemic, both in terms of the fact that 'international solidarity' is absolutely essential for poor countries to deal with this kind of problem but also because just as for climate change and so on, no country will be safe from AIDS until the last country in the world has brought AIDS under control.

It is truly the case that fighting AIDS is a global public good. There is no doubt about that. Even if you have done a great job in Germany in dealing with the AIDS epidemic, and I am not saying that to please you – it is true, you have one of the lowest HIV prevalence rates in the world and in Europe – we all live in a globalized world and distances are becoming irrelevant. That is why effective leadership by the UN is critical in the case of AIDS as the response has to be global, multi-sectoral, involving all kinds of stakeholders, massive and co-coordinated. This is also because the roots of this epidemic are not just in public health and sexual behaviours but also are of a social nature. We are confronted here with some of the main drivers of poverty and social problems in the world such as gender inequity and social exclusion.

What I would like to do before going into the reform aspect is say a few words about the AIDS epidemic because this year is the 25th since AIDS was discovered. This was in June 1981, with what was described first as a mysterious pneumonia among five gay men in Los Angeles. And in just this quarter century, AIDS has become the world's leading cause of death among adults ages 15-59, both men and women. This is not very well known but one out of seven people in the world who die in this age group, die because of AIDS. Consequently, this disease has grown into one of the make-or-break challenges of our century. AIDS has graduated from being one of many public health problems, one of many diseases, to the league of the most major global problems, including global climate change and mass poverty, the issues that if it not brought under control affect all other aspects of the world's future.

This is a powerful illustration of how, in our modern times, something that did not exist can become a global issue rapidly and why effective multilateralism is absolutely essential. If the world had reacted 20 years ago to the AIDS epidemic the same way it is reacting now we would not have had 25 million deaths in the meantime.

Clearly over this last 25 years the epidemic has been outrunning our collective response. However, I must say we are at a turning point and I see a very positive development in the global response to AIDS. While it is too early to talk about success, we can definitely talk about results. We have really reached a momentum on several fronts.

First and foremost, there is a political momentum across the world. When I got into this job few leaders in the world were willing to ever say the word 'AIDS'. Remember that President Reagan, until the very end of his mandate, would not pronounce the word AIDS in public, which was an indicator of the shame and the stigma that is associated with AIDS because it is about sex and drugs. As Freud noted, if you cannot say something you cannot deal with it. But today 40 presidents, prime ministers or vice-presidents personally lead their countries' National AIDS

Commissions or Committees, demonstrating that tackling AIDS is essential for the survival of their nation.

Obviously, this public recognition and this political commitment are extremely important and there we can say a turning point, retrospectively, was 2001. What happened in 2001 is a number of things. The defining moment was a special session of the UN General Assembly devoted to AIDS. At the moment itself I was wondering, "Is this just another talk-shop?" I am Flemish and very skeptical by nature and I think all this talk and talk – where is it leading to? However, in reality it gave us a roadmap of what to do about AIDS. And it put a number of issues on the political agenda, not only on the agenda of public health people or people like me, but at the highest decision-making level.

It also put in place some very serious commitments – the commitment for example by the international community to come up with \$7 billion-\$10 billion by 2005 to fight AIDS in developing countries. I should underline that that target was fully reached – and so this is another front on which there has been tremendous momentum, with the money invested in the response in developing countries going from \$200 million in 1996 to \$8.3 billion in 2005. This is also unprecedented. It is not every day that a target that is set in the UN in one of these big jamborees is reached. I would like to remind everybody that this is not just donor money. One third is money coming from developing countries themselves.

Thirdly we have a momentum of real results. This year in May for the first time since I have been in this job, I could issue a report that had some good news. In East Africa, for example, in almost every country there is a decline in new HIV infections, particularly among young people. And similarly in the Caribbean, in some of the southern states of India, and in Cambodia. So our investments in HIV prevention and HIV treatment are starting to pay off. But please do not think that the AIDS crisis is under control. We are still maybe at 25% of where we have to go. But we have reached here from basically zero so it is progress that really matters.

I think that we in the UN system have contributed to all aspects of this decade-long momentum of progress, often behind the scenes, sometimes in front of the scenes, but all testifying to the fact that when the UN system gets its act together and combines its forces we can really have a major impact on people's lives.

Now to UN reform. I can guarantee you that I did not come into this job with an interest in UN reform but gradually I became interested in it because we – UNAIDS, the Joint UN Programme on HIV/AIDS – did not fit into any box. We did not fit into any box because firstly we are this coalition of various UN agencies, a so-called co-sponsored programme. This coalition was created 10 years ago by the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) of the United Nations because of the recognition by UN Member States that only a multi-sectoral response, drawing on the strengths of diverse UN-family organizations, could succeed against a crisis as massive and complex as AIDS. We began as a coalition of six organizations, but this has now grown to 10. Some are specialized agencies with their own board and elected Director General or Executive Director. And there is the World Bank, a totally different animal dealing with the treasury and ministers of finance. All this is already very difficult to bring together. And in addition, I wanted to bring civil society into our

work. There is no mechanism for doing it but in our board, in UNAIDS, just as in the Global Fund board, we have civil society representatives – mostly people living with HIV.

I was the lucky one who got to lead this effort and I have to say my advantage and disadvantage was that I had never worked in the UN system and I had no clue how the system functions. If I had known I am not sure I would ever have been a candidate. Why am I saying that? Because on the one hand I am a strong believer in the need for and the usefulness of multilateral approaches to a number of problems such as AIDS, and the value-added of it. On the other hand the governance of the system and the culture, the bureaucratic culture and the culture of working which is very much entrenched in various agencies is not something that I had any experience with.

Progress was extremely difficult in the beginning in part because we had no model to follow. The strategy we chose was based on the principles of judo, of using the weight and strength of your opponent to reach your goal. Of course, I was not trying to put the World Bank on the floor, or the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) or the World Health Organization (WHO) but to use their own strength and capacity in the effort against AIDS and to make this a core business of their work. To put AIDS on the agenda everywhere, to make sure that each big organization takes it on. It was clear to me that no one organization could go it alone. When you deal with AIDS, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) has to deliver because we have millions of children and young people getting infected, as well as millions of children orphaned by AIDS. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) because of the governance issues. WHO of course because of HIV treatment reasons and so on and so on. So the UNAIDS joint programme resembles a confederation with a secretary, which is the engine to hold everybody accountable, to set policies, and to do monitoring and evaluation.

I think we have made good progress as a result of this strategy and model. Our mantra today in UNAIDS is really to help make the money work for people on the ground. \$8.3 billion – we have to make sure it reaches the people and that it makes a difference to people's lives. That is where we are very complementary to the other body that is dealing with AIDS, the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. They have money and there is staff in Geneva. Our staff is on the ground in the countries and we have the knowledge. This is how we join forces and we deliver.

Let me mention a few areas where we have managed to achieve real results in terms of reform.

First on governance. Not easy. Governance meaning the overall guidance and accountability of the UN system, which is the primary responsibility of Member States. Here we have been able to generate a common UN response so everybody speaks with the same voice. We have the same policies. When I came into this job every agency had different policies, running in different directions. That is all finished, so there is good coherence in terms of policy and the goals we are working towards. We also have a division of labour because one of the worst problems in the UN system is 'mission creep'. We are all into poverty alleviation; we are all into whatever and so on. Where there is money, everybody will move to that issue. But

we at UNAIDS have a division of labour that says WHO will deliver on access to treatment; the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) is the link with reproductive health and young people; and so on. So it is clear who is supposed to deliver what and I have always refused a discussion on mandates. I have always said: 'That is fine, you discuss the mandate but I want to discuss the results of what we are doing.' Therefore I think there we have really introduced coherence.

Second, I think a major achievement has been working with civil society and frankly in many countries in the beginning we had no choice because the government did not want to deal with AIDS. What did we do? We went to civil society, supporting and making a lot of noise and so on, but also having the genuine impact of civil society on our governing board. Civil society defined in a broad spectrum, also with the churches, with religious organizations, with business, with the trade unions, with youth groups and so on, to form a diverse and growing coalition.

Third, in terms of management, as head of the Secretariat I have tried to introduce some modern time management, which I think is a challenge in every public sector. We have also introduced performance-based pay. We have a mobility policy. And our recruitment is completely depoliticized because it goes through a professional assessment centre which is not linked directly to us, so that protects me from political pressure in making appointments.

Then, very important, at a country level we have now got 25 countries where all the staff working on AIDS in the UN system is working as one team and with one programme and with deliverables. So it is clear who does what, with accountability that is not only within the system but also across as a team. This is pre-empting, I believe, the recommendation of the High Level Panel. It also strengthens the position of the UN Resident Coordinator because there is no way that we can work at a country level if there is not a strong leader around this.

Globally we also have what we call a unified budget and work plan – in other words, the work plan and the budget for AIDS activities of the World Bank, of UNDP, of UNICEF, of WHO, they are all in one document. Just imagine if you had to do that in Germany across ministries. It is a nightmare in the beginning but now people are getting used to it – even appreciating that it has been very helpful in holding everybody accountable.

What I have seen is that success attracts success in the sense that now bilateral donors are also working under these principles and in many countries we are now the hub for every activity on AIDS. Even the U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), is now closely coordinating with our activities, where we developed a framework for all external actors on AIDS to work in a given country following the principles of the Paris Declaration of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development/Development Assistance Committee (OECD/DAC), which means that every donor – private or public – in a country works to further the priorities of the country. So, alignment and harmonization in that all the donors work to further the same goals and we all use the same monitoring and evaluation methods and indicators. Six years ago there were over 300 indicators to measure AIDS programmes by donors. Now we are already at around 50. Our ambition is to

go below 20 so that every donor uses the same ones. It will save transaction costs in a huge way for the developing countries.

This is some of the progress made but we have many remaining challenges. One is on governance and this is also something where I would like to plead also to Germany as a member of the board of various UN agencies. This is regarding the need for consistent guidance at different boards in the UN system. Today, the case is that each Member State may say different things in different boards. One goes to WHO as the Ministry of Health and says one thing. In UNESCO the Ministry of Education says another thing and so on. I am not trying to play the ball back to the Member States, but to point to the imperative need for internal coherence in the guidance by Member States.

Secondly we have to look at being really inclusive in our reform efforts with all multilateral organizations. Donors have set up more and more funds outside the UN system – for instance, the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, and the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization (GAVI). They are increasing the ‘mess’ in a sense so we have to really bring them in, not into the UN system, but certainly into our reform efforts.

Thirdly, the link with civil society I feel is also something we have to improve, to bring back the UN system to its original charter which starts with “the people.” Of course it is governments that remain accountable at the end of the day but we have to be able to incorporate civil society as the engines of the response to AIDS.

Fourthly, reform efforts and coherence have high transaction costs – lots of meetings and so on – and we need to find better ways of doing it. The solution to every problem is not to have another meeting. We have to really be much more strict in accountability and so we are going to look at and measure transactions costs as a price. What we have seen at UNAIDS is that our transaction costs are now going down because we have put some order in our family.

Fifthly, I also think there is a lack of incentives for coherence because the funding structure of the system is such that your performance as a staff member is judged on how much money you can collect. It is not what positive difference it makes for people, no, but how much money have you had in your budget. The incentive is there to raise money for whatever it is so that is where I think some donor discipline is necessary as well as incentives in the system to be rewarded for concrete results.

To end, I would say some of the key lessons learnt with UNAIDS in terms of UN reform are firstly, it is possible. It is possible to do it if you focus on deliverables and something concrete.

Secondly, it requires sustained political and financial investment from within the UN – and I was very fortunate to have Kofi Annan, the Secretary-General, being very committed to the AIDS issue and always supporting me, because I have a tendency to break rules whenever needed. Then it is important that you have somebody to protect you.

Thirdly, it is also important that the reform agenda is not only driven by donor countries but is also owned by the developing countries. I think some of the battles over UN reform resulted from the fact that it was only taken on by donor countries and that the developing countries did not see their fingerprints. Last year for example we came up with the results of a Global Task Team on harmonization of multilateral efforts on AIDS. Its recommendations went very far in terms of coherence and so on and were fully endorsed by all the developing countries. Recommendations that went much less far were then rejected by the same countries in other bodies because they did not find their ownership of it – their fingerprints. That is a very important lesson for me.

Fourthly, I think coherence is best achieved through a pragmatic focus on results. Often the discussions are on structures and not on what we want to deliver.

Fifthly, country needs should be the drivers of global agendas and not the other way around. One size does not fit all. I think the UNAIDS model, if I may say so, this confederation model, could be useful for other cross-cutting issues in the UN system. I am thinking here of gender and of human rights, where we want every agency that exists to take on gender and to take on human rights, but on the other hand we need far more coherence. If you create something that is only dealing with gender that is the best excuse for all the others to abdicate and not deal with it and the world desperately needs more gender-sensitive UN agencies.

Therefore the question is, are the UN system and the Member States ready for the new challenges of our time and will there be the political will to drive through a number of these reforms that are so necessary? I am deeply convinced that if the UN system is not reformed and will not advance further reform, the fight against AIDS will become very difficult.

I would like to end here and thank you for your patience in listening to me and thank you for all your support. I know many of you I see here have played a really important role in both supporting the UN and in the fight against AIDS.

Thank you