

# Multi-stakeholders with Multiple Perspectives: HIV/AIDS in Africa

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**ABSTRACT** *In 2003, UNAIDS launched a scenario-building exercise to explore the impact that HIV/AIDS might have in Africa over the next 20 years. Creating a unique public-private partnership, UNAIDS combined their experience regarding the global AIDS epidemic with Royal Dutch/Shell's history of and expertise in developing scenarios and futures methodologies. Pieter Fourie as a former member of the UNAIDS scenario team outlines a number of key impressions, insights and lessons learnt from this unique scenario-building process.*

**KEYWORDS** *Royal Dutch/Shell; futures methodologies; policy making; lessons; multilateral; multinational; public-private partnership*

## **Background to the project**

HIV currently infects more than 40 million people worldwide, the vast majority of whom live in Africa. AIDS has already killed around 30 million people, and an estimated 3 million people now die from the disease every year. As Hunter (2003: 21) notes, 'this is 8,200 per day, almost three times the number who died in the World Trade Center attack on September 11, 2001'. Decision and policy makers globally as well as in Africa can only conceive of and implement an appropriate response to AIDS once they have a clear sense of what the impact of the epidemic will be – where it will strike, how the epidemic will be fanned across the continent, and which socio-political structures make Africa such a virulent Petri-dish for the dissemination of the virus.

In March 2003, UNAIDS launched a scenario-building project to explore the impact that HIV/AIDS might have in Africa over the next 20 years. The central aim of the project was to assist the African HIV/AIDS community in combating the unfolding epidemic, and to inform policy decisions in particular. The launch of the project was preceded by over a year of planning and coordination among its initiating partners. In addition to the UNAIDS secretariat, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the World Bank, the African Development Bank (ADB) and the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) took institutional ownership of the project, contributed to the project budget, and representatives of these organizations served on its steering committee. Importantly, the experience of UNAIDS in combating the global AIDS epidemic was combined with Royal Dutch/Shell's expertise and more than 30 years' experience in developing scenarios and futures methodologies. The Global

Business Environment (GBE) division within Shell offered their scenario skills and services free of charge, donated some office space at Shell Centre in London for the duration of the project, and (along with UNAIDS) assumed directorship of the project. The codirection and institutional cooperation between UNAIDS and Shell created a novel and ambitious private–public partnership.

A key aim of the project was to identify and bring together ‘remarkable people’ (Van der Heijden, 1996: x) who could comprise the core participant group. It was essential to bring together a broad spectrum of people who would be representative of the ‘African HIV/AIDS world’ – policy makers, politicians, bureaucrats, civil society representatives, activists, exponents of the private sector as well as organized labour, proponents of the biomedical community, and so on. In the end, around 60 individuals were included as the project’s primary participants. These individuals would take ownership of the project, attend the three important workshops that would determine the entire project, build the rough scenarios and, finally, affirm and then champion the final product. In addition to the core participant group, a list of around 40 remarkable individuals were identified for pre-workshop interviews – this second group of HIV/AIDS stakeholders were important in setting the scene and informing the larger workshop process.

In short, this UNAIDS project brought together a great variety of people working in particular roles to create a shared understanding of a complex epidemic and its possible future impacts. Africans, Europeans and North-Americans from different disciplines, cultures and experiences, using different assumptions and often working towards different goals, were all involved. However, a simple breakdown of the players and their responsibilities includes:

*Initiating partners* from the international organizations who backed the project with their finances and prestige;

*Workshop participants* from the African HIV/AIDS world, including activists, medical personnel, and so on;

*Pre-workshop interviewees*;

*Researchers* who assembled statistics, facts and research papers to stimulate thinking and back up ideas and also served on the project support team;

*Project support team* of writers, researchers, workshop facilitators and managers working under the direction of a UNAIDS and Shell partnership.

### What worked well?

The project was particularly fortunate in being able to call on and apply Shell’s scenario expertise, which helped to identify key areas for research, select the workshop participants, manage the workshop processes and visualization, and transfer new skills to all participants. In turn, Shell enhanced its reputation for corporate social responsibility.

All three workshops, and the processes that supported them and used their results, were directed by Shell’s skilled scenario-building team. With more than 30 years of scenario experience, the Shell team consistently saved the project whenever outside and inside forces threatened to derail good work. It is a testimony to Shell’s scenario-building expertise that intricate variations on the main scenario methodology were introduced without any upsets. For instance, the strong normative agendas of the UNAIDS contingent and other participants – all of whom had clear ideas of how the epidemic should be tackled – had to be carefully managed. Well-chosen scenario exercises allowed participants to put their preferred solutions to one side long enough to create a shared understanding of how the epidemic and societies’ responses to it might evolve.

In this way, the skilful use of different scenario-building methodologies kept the process from falling prey to the tensions and disagreements inherent in such a diverse group. The scenario professionals from Shell and its wider network were able to use a very light directive touch at the various workshops to insist that the participants surfaced critically important variables, explored different and opposing units and levels of analysis, and applied broad as well as deep research foci. The strong interdisciplinary focus routinely used

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in scenario work also meant that there were few apparent oversights in terms of the identification of key areas for research.

But methodological expertise is not enough. The initiating partners and the steering committee did a good job in selecting the core group of workshop participants. A better participant group could hardly have been envisaged. However, the 60 or so individuals present at the various workshops were an opinionated group, deeply passionate about HIV/AIDS in Africa, bringing an immensely varied collection of normative agendas. Competing ideas of what should be done created a distinct danger that the entire scenario exercise would fall victim to opposing views and tensions that could have become paralytically aggressive. By repeatedly focusing on what *might* happen, rather than on what *should* happen, some of this tension was reduced. In addition, in order to keep the process from being sidetracked, the Shell team introduced mechanisms such as a 'safety valve wall' and 'fish bowl exercises'. A safety valve wall is an area where participants can anonymously provide feedback on any issue; a fish bowl exercise creates a safe public space where participants can voice their sentiments on sensitive or embarrassing issues without direct challenges from other participants. Not only was tension reduced, but important participant views and ideas were heard.

The workshop process and presentations were also complimented by a stimulating visual representation of the workshop agendas, developments, conversations and procedures. This was achieved through the presence of a graphic visualizer; an artist who illustrated the entire workshop process and its conclusions. The participants were particularly impressed by this innovation. The graphic visualizer was also essential in translating fairly abstract concepts into a more appropriate metaphor for this particular scenario exercise. Naturally, the project brought together participants who otherwise might not have had the financial resources and other means to network around the issue of HIV/AIDS in Africa. However, the variety and combination of workshop techniques stimulated people to initiate strategic conversations they might not otherwise have had. This is one of

the key goals of any scenarios project and it was achieved here. There are clear indications that these conversations will not cease when the first phase of the project comes to an end in late 2004.<sup>1</sup>

Another particularly positive consequence of this scenario exercise was the transfer of skills. In addition to the strategic conversations and networking among key African HIV/AIDS stakeholders, this project trained workshop participants in scenario thinking; it communicated a new and powerful research methodology to initiating partners, team members and participants alike.

### What did not work?

The UNAIDS scenarios exercise was more complex than most, covering highly politicized issues that straddle many diverse disciplines. This provided some unique challenges, especially around issues of trust, respect, and making that which is hidden more explicit. Unfortunately, key elements of the UNAIDS scenario process remained undiscussed. For instance, the donor/funder agenda was never made explicit. Nor was it ever clear who would speak for or represent people living with HIV/AIDS. Would this core group be represented by the multilateral elite, the elite in the Global South or grassroots representatives from Africa? In the eyes of one participant, this issue (and others like it) was never sufficiently explored (Anon2, 2004). The lack of such discussion made it much harder for trust and respect to grow.

As important, the answer to the critical question 'Who is the client?' remained contested. Ostensibly, the multilateral community was driving this project with a view to serving the HIV/AIDS community in Africa. Unfortunately, a few of the workshop participants as well as some of the team members came to a different conclusion. They believed that key initiating partners from the international institutions were involved more for their own institutional sake. They also felt these institutions were driving a developed world as well as a 'northern aid industry' agenda rather than an agenda for Africa and Africans (Anon1, 2004). For example, some of the initiating partners found it exceedingly difficult to leave their

own normative agendas by the door – in spite of asking the African workshop participants to do so. This meant that the mental maps of the initiating partners (most of whom were not African) might have been allowed to unduly influence the scenario-building process and aspects of the research agenda, with less respect for the positions of the African participants.

The primary implication of the above was that some of the participants and a number of the African project team members felt that the organizers did not pay sufficient respect to the stated 'client' (Africa) (Anon2, 2004). The fact that the project was based in Shell's London office in the Global North (which helped to reduce the costs) and not somewhere in Africa became and remained an issue. The perception of bias in the process was reinforced by the fact that the project support team were mainly white, non-African individuals. Consequently, there was painfully little true reflection and understanding of Africa's diversity, with the first drafts of the scenarios sounded exceedingly 'un-African' – written in and for the Global North rather than using the language of and for Africa. Some participants also believed that public criticism of the methodology, questions about the research results and certain direct criticism of multilateral agencies were deleted from the record taken of the workshop sessions (Anon1, 2004). Such beliefs illustrate how difficult it is to cater for such diverse audiences from both developed and developing world contexts. In the end, the project did make some headway on including African voices by using stories, poems and other means to portray the same message in different ways.

This created a situation where the project team–participant interface was at times a challenging one to manage. The use of email in particular was not the most appropriate communications medium for links with the African participants. The project support team's repeated attempts to engage with the workshop participants via email were at times viewed as excessively frequent and even patronizing, leading to a low response rate from participants. The repeated attempts to engage alienated some participants, as the process had not clearly articulated what would be required of

them (Anon2, 2004). The lesson is that there is a great need to clarify expectations and responsibilities upfront.

The project team could have done more to address the challenges of diversity: dealing with such a plurality of political viewpoints is more difficult to manage than institutional differences, and the only way is to allow sufficient time to air issues, particularly in Africa – this had not been sufficiently accounted for in the planning phase. This is also true for the language issue: time-constraints became an issue due to the reality of running workshops and producing written material in two languages (English and French). The length of time required to manage translation was underestimated, putting pressure on the preparation of documents as well as on workshops (Anon2, 2004).

### **Key lessons**

Scenario processes are ultimately about trust, learning and insight. This project provided a challenging environment in which representatives from the Global North and the Global South engaged with each other in an important conversation. The following lessons are valuable both for conventional policy research, as well as for exceptional scenario-building projects such as this one:

- Combine different scenario methodologies where required.
- Continually make sure that everyone involved in the process knows what scenarios are, what they are not, and the different kinds of scenarios that can be built.
- The process of scenario-building is always unique. For that reason, it is important to set out the expectations and requirements of all parties. Everyone needs to have a clear understanding of what is being done, to what end and what he or she is expected to contribute.
- Expectations of what can be expected in a business context may not apply to activists and others from different institutional cultures. Often such people are not funded or supported to the same extent by their employers and have

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other fulltime commitments, making it hard for them to do all the scenario work expected of them.

- Participants are keen to have confidence that the scenarios which they are building will actually be used. For this reason, it is good to refer to and plan the roll-out and dissemination phase of the project right from the start. The last thing that workshop participants want is for a set of scenarios to sit on a shelf.
- Take particular care in establishing and maintaining the legitimacy of the work and the trust of the participants.
- Listen to the participants; respect them; cultivate them as future champions. It is also important to listen to what participants are *not* telling the project team. In Africa, rather than protest loudly (as might be the norm in the West), we sometimes protest by simply withholding explicit consent, retreating and using a (loud) silence.
- Be sensitive to North–South issues. In this project it might have been preferable to have located the actual project somewhere in Africa and to have appointed more African project managers and team members. It is difficult to maintain trust with the participants if the project direction and management in no way reflects the so-called ‘client’.
- Beware of what can be perceived as cultural and intellectual arrogance. Scenarios cannot be built within a hierarchical structure and have to be based on the premise that there is no monopoly on wisdom.

- Beware conflict between the initiating partners, and manage the relationship between them with great care. The project team members should never be caught up in a situation where they receive different messages or instructions from their various principals.
- Be extremely sensitive to normative agendas, those preferred solutions and goals we all carry. In this case, the workshop participants, the initiating partners and members of the project support team all had competing ideals informing their views. All needed to understand that everyone’s assumptions and norms would be questioned during the process.
- Be truly honest about who the client is, and interrogate this issue on a continual basis. Ostensibly, the AIDS community in Africa was the client of this project. However, there was a strong feeling among African representatives that UNAIDS in particular was driving its own agenda.

UNAIDS should be commended as the custodian for such a novel approach to combating the horror that is HIV/AIDS in Africa. For maybe the first time ever, collective wisdom has been sought from a very broad range of stakeholders. This project has brought together much of the disparate thinking of 20 years of the AIDS industry. In spite of all the tensions in the project, it has already and should in future lead to some serious rethinking about and reinterpretation of the past, the present and the future of this exceptional epidemic.

### Note

1 This article was written in the Summer of 2004, and at that time it was envisaged that the scenarios would be launched somewhere in West Africa. For more information, visit the project website at <http://aidsscenarios.unaids.org/scenarios>.

### References

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## Epilogue

*AIDS in Africa: Three scenarios to 2025* had its origins more than three years ago when UNAIDS and Shell International Ltd. agreed to explore new territory, examining the wider and longer term future effects of the HIV epidemic, using Shell's expertise in scenario development. The African Development Bank, the UN Economic Commission for Africa, the World Bank and the UN Development Programme joined UNAIDS as partners in the initiation and oversight of the project. The ambition was to attempt the first continent-wide exploration of what might happen, reflecting the long wave nature of the epidemic and its impacts up to 2025. With the assistance of the African Union and representatives of African civil society, a diverse group of 50 project participants came together, the majority being Africans living and working in Africa. The fruits of the labour of this participant group, including the wide range of research and analysis that was commissioned in support of their work, will form the basis of a book and a CD Rom.

The supporting partners of this project shared a common goal: to produce scenarios that would stimulate policy dialogue on AIDS in Africa, and thereby strengthen the quality of the response. The project has sought to create a space in which the underlying issues of the epidemic can be explored frankly, including political and institutional agendas.

As the project progressed, the process was continually adapted in the face of unfolding challenges, many of which mirror the struggle to end the epidemic. Among the actors affected by and affecting the AIDS epidemic in Africa, there are

many stakeholders, many realities, many agendas. It would be naive to expect otherwise, given a subject of such intense importance and complexity - literally a matter of life and death for tens of millions of people. The collective journey of learning in this project process has been emotionally as well as intellectually demanding for those involved.

The project was ambitious, not only in its subject matter, but in the public-private partnership that led it, and the reality of managing institutional relationships. In the course of the project, the opportunities for learning have been considerable, both in the insights into the AIDS epidemic and the importance of making new partnerships work.

The three scenarios highlight the uncertainty around the spread and impacts of HIV/AIDS over the next 20 years. As a set, the scenarios provide a tool for testing and improving today's actions and decisions by inviting stakeholders to face the assumptions, blind spots and uncertainties that might otherwise remain implicit.

The scenarios will be launched in early 2005 and should be thought of as a starting point rather than an end in themselves. They are designed to be provocative, and aim at generating new ideas rather than prescribing what to do. The fact that these scenarios were successfully built, is, we believe, a symbol that the challenges of collaboration - public and private, multilateral and institutional, developing and developed world - can indeed be navigated.

The Project Team,  
AIDS in Africa: Scenarios for the Future  
[www.unaids.org/aidsscenarios](http://www.unaids.org/aidsscenarios)