

Harassment and the future of UNAIDS

Following a damning report on UNAIDS and its leaders, how does the organisation need to change to best tackle the HIV/AIDS pandemic? Sophie Cousins reports.



At the end of 2018, a scathing independent report called for a change of leadership at UNAIDS, concluding that the “UNAIDS Secretariat is in crisis, a crisis which threatens its vital work”.

The independent report described “a broken organisational culture”, “a vacuum of accountability”, and “a work culture of fear, lack of trust, and retaliation”. It accuses the executive director, Michel Sidibé, of creating a patriarchal culture tolerant of harassment and bullying, and describes a “cult of personality” surrounding Sidibé, alleging that his senior management staff is a “boys’ club” that did not effectively prevent or properly respond to allegations of sexual harassment, bullying, and abuse of power.

From its inception, UNAIDS has been concerned not only with the prevention and treatment of HIV and AIDS, but also with fighting against systems that exacerbate imbalances of power—making these revelations especially disheartening.

The panel that produced the report, chaired by Gillian Triggs, was set up earlier in 2018, after it emerged that senior figures at UNAIDS had been accused of sexual harassment and bullying, including two former deputy executive directors: Luiz Loures and Jan Beagle.

More than 60% of UNAIDS staff provided information to the panel. One submission reads, “UNAIDS is like a predators’ prey ground... You can use promises of jobs, contracts and all sorts of opportunities and abuse your power to get whatever you want”.

The damning report called for a new, energetic leader to be appointed, one “who can earn the confidence of the staff and return UNAIDS to its fundamental commitment to

non-discrimination, due process, and good governance”. The report also made several governance, leadership, management, and policy recommendations, including establishing accountability of the executive director function and developing and implementing regular preventive training.

Since the publication of the report, Sidibé has announced that he will resign his post in June, 2019—6 months before his term was due to end. However, calls for Sidibé’s immediate resignation have grown louder as public health experts, organisations, and activists such as the AIDS Healthcare Foundation called for UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres to step in.

Sima Newell, a former director at UNAIDS who says that she was harassed and bullied by Jan Beagle between 2012 and 2015, said that Sidibé should leave immediately. “His continued tenure... puts those who have spoken up at grave personal risk. Sidibé’s staying on, on his own terms, is frankly very scary and damaging to victims and witnesses.”

Sidibé recommended Newell’s case be closed following an internal investigation that found the allegations to be unsubstantiated. While the investigation was ongoing, Beagle was promoted to Under-Secretary General for management at the UN. She has robustly denied the allegations.

UNAIDS has issued a 54-page response to the panel’s findings, including five components for action: putting staff at the centre; strengthening compliance and standards; galvanising leadership, governance, and oversight; investing in management systems and activities; and enhancing capacity.

A spokesperson for UNAIDS said that it would, among other activities, work with survivors and women’s rights experts to examine options to establish an external and independent investigation, disciplinary, and redressal system, and that it would institute inclusive active-bystander training.

“UNAIDS underscores that harassment, including sexual harassment, bullying and abuse of power at any level, will not be tolerated and that perpetrators will be held accountable for their actions”, the spokesperson said. “The executive director is fully aware that there is much to do—across all levels of the organisation.”

Many, including the Swedish Government, have expressed concern for the organisation’s ability to regain its credibility without an immediate change of leadership. Furthermore, amid funding declines and fresh challenges in tackling HIV and AIDS, Christine Stegling, executive director of the International HIV/AIDS Alliance, fears that HIV could slip further down the global health agenda unless structural abuses of power within the agency are addressed promptly.

“Full implementation of the report’s recommendations and the organisation’s proposed agenda for change is a good starting point but, if it is to once again be a leader in mobilising political will and financial resources to address HIV, it must clearly demonstrate that it has learned from this difficult period”, she said.

“We need a strong, credible global coordinating body more than ever to protect the fragile progress that has been made in the past three decades.”

Sophie Cousins



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