

*International AIDS Society*



*International AIDS Conference*  
**Future Directions Project**

## **Maximizing the Impact of the International AIDS Conference**

### Introduction

No community, organization or government can effectively address the HIV/AIDS pandemic working in isolation. Only by bringing together all those involved in combating the epidemic - researchers, healthcare workers, civil society, governments, UN organizations, activists, donors, industry, the media, and, critically, people living with HIV/AIDS - can we hope to create long-term strategies for reversing the scourge of HIV/AIDS. International AIDS Conferences have provided a unique global venue for this effort over the past 20 years.

In late 2004, The International AIDS Society (IAS), custodian of the International AIDS Conference (the Conference), recognized the need for a comprehensive review of the mission, objectives, programme elements and organizing structure of the Conference. The Future Directions Project (Future Directions), launched in November 2004, is the first major review of the Conference since its creation in 1985.

Future Directions was designed to seek the input of a wide range of stakeholders in the HIV/AIDS community and make recommendations to the IAS Governing Council. An email requesting input to the Project was sent to all IAS members and all delegates from the previous three International AIDS Conferences. Five group consultations attended by over 60 individuals were held with different constituencies, over 50 confidential interviews were completed, and the Future Directions website ([www.iasociety.org/futuredirections](http://www.iasociety.org/futuredirections)) received over 60 emails and over 50 postings to online discussions.<sup>1</sup> Draft recommendations, based on a synthesis of all input received by Future Directions, were posted on the Future Directions website in July 2005. Two additional consultations were held at the IAS Pathogenesis Conference later that month.

Comments on the Future Directions draft recommendations were accepted through early September 2005. This document reflects those additional comments and suggestions. It is divided into five sections:

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<sup>1</sup> People interviewed for Future Directions included activists, providers, policy makers, donors, journalists, United Nations officials, grass roots NGO representatives, scientists, and youth and business leaders. One quarter of people interviewed were from the South, and many of the contributions through email and in web-based forums were from individuals living in the South.

- Conference vision
- Conference goals
- Proposed strategies
- Recommended actions

The Conference Organizing Committee (COC) for the XVI International AIDS Conference has reviewed and endorsed the strategies proposed in this document as they relate to the development of the 2006 Conference Programme. The Conference Secretariat is now working to implement these strategies and actions. Changes to the organizing structure of the Conference will be considered for implementation at the beginning of the planning process for the XVII International AIDS Conference, to be held in 2008. Planning for the XVII International AIDS Conference will begin in early 2006.

## **Conference Vision**

The Conference has evolved from a relatively small scientific meeting focused on understanding an emerging epidemic to the largest and most diverse international gathering dedicated to a global health issue. Today the Conference is as much about state of the art practice and effective utilization of available tools as it is about new scientific knowledge. As a gathering that brings together so many people and focuses on such a politically charged life and death issue, the Conference will always generate controversy. It should also be a place that concentrates attention on evidence and outcomes over rhetoric and individual or organizational agendas. It should engage people on an ongoing basis, rather than focus exclusively on the five days of the actual Conference meetings. The Conference must maintain and expand the extensive involvement of all HIV/AIDS stakeholders throughout the world, including people living with HIV/AIDS, especially those from marginalized and vulnerable communities, other civil society representatives, health professionals, researchers, government, intergovernmental organizations, industry and the media. At Toronto and beyond, the Conference must be a premier international forum where lessons learned and best practices are acknowledged and shared, productive dialogue is nurtured, accountability is promoted, and the AIDS community engages collectively in tackling the central challenges before us.

## **Conference Goals**

The International AIDS Conference is a forum for everybody engaged in the response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic and a platform to reach the global public.

Specifically, the Conference seeks to:

- Expand public awareness of the continued impact of and global response to HIV/AIDS
- Highlight recent successes, as well as current challenges and the potential to overcome them
- Influence key policy makers to increase commitment and responsible action based on evidence
- Support the engagement and destigmatisation of PLWHAs and those working professionally in HIV/AIDS

- Enable those working in the field of HIV/AIDS to be better prepared to meet the needs of those affected by and living with HIV/AIDS
- Be inclusive of those engaged in the response to AIDS, and transparent in the way that it is planned and implemented

## Proposed Strategies

Seven strategies can be used to accomplish the goals above. The recommended strategies are:

1. **Expand dialogue and productive debate.** The conference must remain a place where different views and opinions can be freely aired, but it should also do more to promote discussion and critical thinking about the diverse perspectives presented, encourage productive dialogue among people with different views, and put policy makers, researchers, advocates and others in direct contact.
2. **Organize some sessions around key challenges in HIV/AIDS.** Many of the biggest challenges in the epidemic cut across traditional disciplines and Conference tracks. Organizing clusters of sessions focused on three to four major challenges will bring more of a sense of coherence to the Conference programme and enable delegates to discuss barriers and potential solutions collectively.
3. **Dedicate several sessions to discussion of Lessons from the Field.** HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment services are being scaled up in resource-limited countries around the world. The Conference represents a unique opportunity to widely discuss and disseminate lessons learned in scale up, acknowledge successes, and address barriers to expanded delivery of AIDS services.
4. **Promote accountability among all stakeholders.** Many leaders and organizations use the Conference as a place to announce programmes and make commitments. The Conference should also become recognized as a venue for reviewing action taken on the promises that have been made and for assessing, in a productive and collaborative way, the work of all stakeholders. Accountability is for everybody: political leaders, program implementers, activists, scientists, and others involved in the response to HIV/AIDS.
5. **Increase the presence and quality of science.** Participation of researchers in a revitalized scientific programme is crucial if the Conference is to encourage an evidence-based response to AIDS. There are now many venues, including the Conference, for announcing scientific breakthroughs. The Conference can also become a place known for high level discussion of top scientific challenges. Science takes many forms at the Conference, including basic, clinical, behavioral, social, political, economic and other sciences. A greater emphasis is needed on evidence of outcomes and overall quality in all Conference presentations.
6. **Improve communications about, and within, the Conference.** Better communications can help delegates prepare for a Conference that focuses on productive dialogue, key challenges, and intensive discussion of best practices

in research, policy and service delivery. Improved use of communications tools can expand the reach of the Conference and facilitate networking and ongoing dialogue after the Conference itself is over.

- 7. Expand access to and inclusion in the Conference.** Diversity is one of the most valuable aspects of the Conference, and people living with HIV/AIDS and people from less developed countries should be increasingly visible at the Conference. Yet too many people are unable to attend for financial and other reasons. Conferences are expensive to run, but more could be done to expand access for people living with HIV/AIDS, people from less developed countries, young researchers and grass roots service providers. Options to explore include reduced fees, more scholarships, increased virtual access, and expansion of the recently implemented differential fee structure.

## **Recommended Actions**

A variety of actions are recommended to pursue each of the strategies identified above.

### **Expand dialogue and productive debate (1.0)**

**1.1 Change the dynamics of Conference sessions.** Experiment with session formats specifically designed to stimulate dialogue and productive debate. Expand the role of the moderators in many sessions so that they engage speakers with facts and counterpoints, promote dialogue, synthesize discussion points and, where appropriate, seek to identify ways forward on particular issues. Assign chairs to sessions on a particular topic and have them design an interesting and diverse panel discussion. Have more sessions where presentations are no longer than three minutes and the moderator encourages discussion among panelists and between panelists and the audience. At some sessions put speakers in comfortable chairs, take away the podium and tables, and have speakers and the audience sit at the same level. Consider session models used by the World Economic Forum and other events to maximize productive dialogue between delegates and speakers. Avoid scheduling sessions in large rooms that feel "empty".

**1.2 Create more diverse panels and more direct contact.** Hold more professionally moderated debates with the goal of having an interesting exchange of perspectives and identifying areas of agreement and disagreement (rather than each side trying to "win"). Have journalists chair some of the debates. Have more sessions with a variety of informed panelists willing to engage in discussion: bring politicians, UN leaders, activists, NGO and faith based organization providers and others together on the same panels. Hold sessions where political leaders make short presentations and then have unstructured dialogue with each other and the audience. Have more non-abstract driven sessions addressing "hot topics" and "political late breakers" that are stimulating and timely. Have a team of professional moderators who each chair a number of sessions each day. Include people living with HIV/AIDS, people from developing countries and representatives of vulnerable and marginalized populations as moderators. Involve more people from resource-constrained countries, people living with HIV/AIDS, youth, and activists in Conference sessions and increase their direct access to decision makers.

- 1.3 Set the tone at the opening and closing sessions.** Inspire delegates at the opening session, emphasizing the goals of the week and what is new at each Conference. Make the closing session a “call to action”. Leave delegates with a sense of the discussions and debates of the past week, and commonly identified priorities for moving forward. More fully incorporate top line points from rapporteurs in the closing sessions. Avoid making either the opening or closing sessions feel like a spectacle. Call the Opening and Closing Sessions “sessions” rather than “ceremonies”. Integrate community members and activists into opening and closing sessions in a way that ensures they are heard. Ensure the COC has the opportunity to review plans for the opening and closing sessions.
- 1.4 Make plenaries more provocative.** Choose plenary topics based on what is most interesting and important for delegates to hear. Ensure plenary speakers are perceived as leaders in their fields and are good speakers. Link plenaries directly to key challenges (discussed below). Pick some plenary speakers who will be controversial. Invite people from outside the “AIDS world” to present, including leaders in foreign relations, economics, social science, and art as a way of building productive linkages and promoting cross-fertilization of ideas. Provide venues for more formal interaction between plenary speakers and delegates after the plenary. Reduce the length of plenary presentations. Ensure people living with HIV/AIDS are among plenary speakers. Make professional coaching available to plenary speakers.
- 1.5 Hold policy dialogues.** Invite papers on key policy and programmatic issues, such as approaches to HIV prevention, guidelines for research in developing countries, affordability of second line therapy, development of public health infrastructure through treatment scale up, and high volume distribution of drugs. Create panels with people with diverse expertise and experience to tackle each issue. Have short presentations followed by a moderated discussion among panel members, and then questions from the audience. These sessions might be used as one vehicle to address Key Challenges.
- 1.6 Tackle the difficult social issues:** Don’t sideline politically challenging issues like drug use, needle exchange, women’s equality, sex education, gay sexuality, youth sexuality, men who have sex with men, and sex work. Ensure these and other controversial topics that are important in the epidemic have a place in the larger Conference forums as well as dedicated sessions in the programme.
- 1.7 Promote “managed confrontation”.** Sponsor small group meetings in advance of and at the Conference with moderators to facilitate dialogue between industry, activists, and other groups.
- 1.8 Make the Conference schedule clearer.** Avoid scheduling sessions on similar topics (or the two most compelling presentations of the day) at the same time. Distinguish between sessions with beginning, intermediate and advanced-level discussion of topics (e.g. “101” or “401”). Provide “road maps” for delegates and customized programmes through the Conference based on various interest areas.
- 1.9 Promote networking:** Dedicate space for structured networking among Conference delegates, and set aside time for networking that does not conflict with sessions. Create ways for people with like interests to meet, such as devoting space and time on a selected topic with a very short talk by a prominent

person followed by time for networking. Identify ways to help “first timers” to the Conference meet others with similar interests.

## **Organize some sessions around key challenges in HIV/AIDS (2.0)**

**2.1 Identify key challenges:** Identify three or four major challenges that represent significant barriers to advancing the response to AIDS. These should be challenges that would benefit from discussion among conference delegates, and that cut across several different Conference tracks and/or components. Challenges should be specific enough so as to focus discussion on tangible obstacles and productive solutions. Sessions should be organized with the goal of identifying common agendas, areas where more dialogue is needed, and strategies to overcome barriers. Conference stakeholders and partners should be involved in selecting challenges and designing challenge sessions.

**2.2 Integrate challenges into the programme:** The Conference Organizing Committee (COC) should work with each of the programme committees to integrate sessions focused on each challenge into the Conference programme. Use plenary addresses to introduce challenges. Each challenge should be the subject of *at least* one plenary presentation and several other sessions, such as dedicated non-abstract and abstract sessions, debates, forums, workshops, and other formats. Each challenge should be addressed across several Conference tracks. Publicize challenge areas in advance of the Conference and encourage announcement of new commitments and issuing of monitoring reports and advocacy documents addressing each challenge area.

**2.3 Synthesize challenge discussions:** Create special “rapporteur teams” focused on each of the challenges and have these teams synthesize major themes, areas of consensus, disagreement, and top issues for moving forward. Have these syntheses reported at the closing ceremony.

**2.4 Preparation and follow up:** There should be dedicated staff available to support the planning of each challenge area well in advance of the Conference, in addition to serving as rapporteurs. Staff could help organize pre-Conference discussion forums with programme committees and external stakeholders, prepare background documents, and host dialogue on the internet on the challenge area. Background materials, summarizing recent discussions, agreements, and research in each Challenge area, should be available for delegates. Staff should also support follow up activities after the Conference, perhaps by monitoring developments and commitments, facilitating continued dialogue through the internet and other means, and disseminating information.

**2.5 Consider new models for overall structure:** For the Conference as a whole, and not just the “challenges” sessions, explore alternatives to the current use of tracks as the primary organizing format for the Conference programme.

## **Dedicate several sessions to discussion of Lessons from the Field (3.0)**

**3.1 Collaborate with other knowledge transfer efforts:** Develop special sessions within the Conference devoted to intensive presentation of lessons learned, model programmes, and collective work to address barriers to AIDS treatment and prevention scale up. Collaborate with other existing “knowledge transfer” efforts related to scale up. Involve major donors and providers in planning, including the Global Fund, WHO, UNAIDS, PEPFAR, and private sector, community-based and major NGO and FBO providers.

**3.2 Emphasize information exchange and acknowledgement of success:** Design Lessons from the Field sessions to focus on implementation successes, barriers and lessons learned, rather than political debates. Invite implementation-level staff from major organizations, rather than political spokespeople. Focus sessions so they are highly relevant and oriented to problem solving. Avoid having “experts” tell others what the answer is; instead invite a variety of implementers to share their experiences and discuss their challenges and successes. Use communications to highlight countries that have accomplished their treatment and/or prevention roll out targets. Don’t just cover successes: also review where implementation has hit problems, and what can be learned from these experiences. Highlight community-based prevention and care initiatives and the involvement of community members as providers of treatment literacy education and care.

**3.3 Incorporate regional perspectives:** Create Lessons from the Field sessions where national AIDS coordinators, community, providers, activists, and multilaterals working in particular regions can discuss region-specific issues on service scale up. Incorporate information on best practices and barriers identified at regional AIDS conferences. Inform regional AIDS conferences with Lessons from the Field discussions from the International Conference.

**3.4 Create materials to accompany Lessons from the Field sessions:** Have a dedicated rapporteur follow Lessons from the Field sessions, synthesize discussions for the daily Conference newsletter, and report out areas of consensus at the closing ceremony. Prepare information packets and web-based follow up to enable the Lessons from the Field component to continue to aid scale up activities after the Conference.

**3.5 Bring more intentional design to skills building sessions:** Design skills building sessions more intentionally, rather than simply accepting the best proposals. Identify the skills that are needed most urgently in the current response to AIDS and ensure these are adequately covered. Draw upon recommendations from the ICASO *Institutional Memory Project*, including establishing standardized formats for skills building sessions and reviewing session plans in advance. The Skills Building Working Group should liaison closely with those working on the Lessons from the Field sessions to ensure these two components of the programme complement each other.

**3.6 Promote learning for researchers:** Alongside skills building sessions, create dedicated sessions for scientists and researchers to mentor each other. Provide learning sessions at which scientists, government representatives, and community members can learn how to collaborate more effectively.

## **Promote accountability among all stakeholders (4.0)**

- 4.1 Encourage dignitaries to engage in dialogue.** Ask all political leaders and other dignitaries and/or celebrities who speak at the Conference to agree to engage in some form of dialogue with Conference delegates. Set a norm that if the Conference provides a platform for dignitaries they should engage in dialogue with delegates.
- 4.2 Make accountability a priority:** Hold forums to discuss progress on international targets such as UNGASS, "3 by 5" and Millennium Development Goals. Put policy makers from governments and multilaterals in direct dialogue with Conference delegates. Emphasize accountability in the Leadership component of the Conference programme. Focus on constructive efforts to identify and promote solutions to problems that have arisen. Encourage delegates to follow up with policy makers when they return home, and give delegates tools to maximize the impact of these interactions. Ask scholarship recipients to commit to report back about the Conference to their home communities, constituencies and networks.
- 4.3 Create venues for tough questions:** In designing session formats, utilize models like *Hard Talk* in which leaders are asked tough questions by a seasoned journalist.
- 4.4 Monitor commitments made:** Report on the status of follow up on commitments made at the Bangkok Conference and announce that follow up on commitments made at Toronto will be tracked and reported at the 2008 Conference.

## **Increase the presence and quality of science (5.0)**

- 5.1 Organize high level discussions:** Design high level roundtable discussions on top scientific questions. Secure the attendance of leading scientists to these discussions and announce their attendance well in advance. Make these and other discussions sufficiently narrow and focused to be intriguing and useful to scientists, rather than attempting to cover a wide range of scientific topics in one session. Create some sessions that focus on barriers, and potential solutions, to making scientific progress rather than solely on scientific issues themselves.
- 5.2 Invite top scientists:** Ensure that several highly respected scientists are invited to give talks. Do not require them to give a review of an entire area of scientific research. Encourage them to provide an advanced presentation if they wish to. Invite high profile scientists from earlier in the epidemic to come and give their perspectives on scientific issues.
- 5.3 Make evidence and quality top priorities:** The COC and program committees should evaluate options for raising the standard of abstracts accepted. This may include more clearly stipulating minimum requirements for acceptance. All Conference planning committees should stress the importance of providing solid *evidence of outcomes* in addition to descriptive presentations of programmes. To the degree new standards are set for reviewing abstracts, widely publicize these standards and the renewed commitment to quality.

**5.4 Hold “mini-conferences”:** Consider encouraging outside organizations to sponsor mini-science conferences or satellite sessions within the larger conference. These independently- sponsored conferences could involve a small group of scientists and others with interest in the area to be discussed. Though the sessions might be invite-only, a rapporteur would report out on the discussions.

**5.5 Make presentations more broadly accessible:** Provide expanded coverage of scientific sessions on the internet, and make presenters’ slides and full posters available as well. Also make abstracts easier to access via the internet, before, during and after the Conference. Abstracts should be searchable by category, track and day, as well as by author and title.

**5.6 Create researcher mentoring opportunities:** Hold presentations and discussions to enable experienced researchers to mentor newer researchers. Provide opportunities for junior researchers to engage with each other. Hold smaller meetings of junior researchers on particular topics.

**5.7 Make evidence-based policy and programme development an organizing principle of the Conference.** Design sessions that help delegates apply evidence from presentations to policy and programme design. In Conference materials, media and Secretariat statements, promote the Conference as a place to focus on evidence and outcomes.

## **Improve communications about, and within, the Conference (6.0)**

**6.1 Create new expectations:** Use op eds, journal articles, the Conference invitation programme and website, and media relations to highlight changes to the Conference, including an emphasis on open and productive dialogue, collective work on key challenges, Lessons from the Field, and other changes. Institutionalize a communications advisory group that includes multiple stakeholders. Send several emails to registrants ahead of the Conference noting high profile speakers, new sessions, hot topics, etc.

**6.2 Bring regional perspectives in virtually:** Telecast live messages and discussions with political, science and community leaders from regions around the world during the Conference to ground the Conference in a sense of immediacy about the epidemic in diverse communities.

**6.3 Put the most newsworthy people out front:** Invite the most interesting, newsworthy speakers (and not just the plenary speakers) to the daily press briefing.

**6.4 Expand the utility of rapporteur reports:** Consider strategies to make rapporteur reports more dynamic and usable. Put more emphasis on synthesizing presentations, summarizing key points, identifying consensus areas for action and topics for ongoing discussion. Have rapporteurs prepare PowerPoint presentations and post them on the Conference website. Integrate the “take away” points from rapporteur reports more fully into the Closing Session. Consider preparing printed and video resources that capture the most relevant Conference presentations and events in several subject areas.

**6.5 Significantly expand use of the internet:** Provide more webcasting of sessions and timely posting of slide presentations and other relevant documents. Use the internet to engage delegates and others in discussions about key challenges and other topics ahead of, during, and after the conference. Create internet forums for dialogue during and after the Conference. Provide opportunities through the internet for people from the same countries to connect before, during and after the Conference and to share their experiences and learning with others in their home countries. Seek sponsorship for regional internet hubs, perhaps housed at hospitals, research facilities, academic settings, and NGOs, where people could access the Conference live using high speed connections.

**6.6 Expand translation services:** Increase availability of translation and interpretation services, including sign for deaf individuals. Make the Conference website more multi-lingual and useful to non-English speakers. Explore the possibility of inviting more people to volunteer to provide translation services.

**6.7 Ensure journalists have adequate tools:** Expand availability of workstations in the press room. Provide assistance to journalists who may not be completely familiar with use of the internet.

## **Expand access to and inclusion in the Conference (7.0)**

**7.1 Lower barriers to attendance:** Consider a variety of mechanisms to expand access to the Conference by people from resource-constrained countries, people living with HIV/AIDS, people providing direct services, and young people across stakeholder groups, including researchers, community practitioners and health professionals. Options to consider include more scholarships, lowered registration fees, expanded use of the new differential fee structure, increased capacity to provide virtual access to the conference via the internet, and expanded assistance with visa applications. Encourage organizations to sponsor more people from less developed countries.

**7.2 Ensure transparency in the scholarship programme:** Provide more information about the process of selecting scholarship recipients and the demographics of those awarded scholarships. Ensure that first time applicants receive equal consideration for scholarship awards.

**7.3 Engage PLWHIV/AIDS groups:** Establish more linkages with organizations of people living with HIV/AIDS globally in order to discuss expanded PLWHIV/AIDS attendance, services, and visibility at the Conference.

**7.4 Provide meeting space:** Set aside meeting rooms or large rooms with section dividers where groups can meet free-of-charge. Some spaces should be available for impromptu meetings, some for booking in advance.

**7.5 Evaluate each conference and seek ongoing input:** Develop an evaluation plan that includes process, outcome and long term impact evaluations. Hold stakeholder consultations, interview key informants, and invite web-based input after each Conference as a way of bringing more voices to an ongoing conversation about Conference evolution.

**7.6 Help build capacity of affected communities:** Utilize skills building sessions, the Leadership Programme, and other programme elements to build the capacity of delegates from affected communities to participate in the Conference, interact with decision makers, report back to other community members not in attendance, and follow up with local policy makers when they return home.

### **Comments on Topics Addressed at the International AIDS Conference**

The focus of the Future Directions Project has been on the programmatic elements and format of the Conference rather than particular subject matter for Conference sessions. However, it is important to note that many people interviewed for Future Directions pointed to topics that they believe have not received adequate attention at recent Conferences. Topics raised included: African Americans, women and girls, orphaned and vulnerable children's issues, NGO concerns, HIV home care and community care programmes, nursing, integration of TB/HIV services, indigenous peoples, policy on intellectual property and the use of generic drugs, food security, human rights, sociology and social science, researchers from less developed countries, development issues, and alternative medicine. It is important that future Conferences ensure that, as much as possible, all topics relevant to the response to HIV/AIDS are adequately addressed.