

The Uganda AIDS Think Tank

Embracing the Think Tank Approach to harness knowledge and promote innovation in HIV/AIDS policy and programme development and implementation

Principles and Guidelines

Uganda AIDS Commission
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1.0 Background

Uganda's efforts against the AIDS epidemic, characterized by innovation, have registered some achievements evidenced by the declining prevalence rates during the 1990s. Surveillance reports and national level reviews of various programmes in the last 3 to 4 years have however reflected stagnating national prevalence rates at a high level of 6%. This has been, attributed, among other factors, to information fatigue, complacency and the rapidly changing environments in which the dynamics of epidemic are addressed.

While recognizing these challenges, the country's political leadership identified the need for innovative interventions to achieve national priorities. The establishment of a Think Tank has been suggested to boost innovation in addressing different facets of the national response

2.0 The Uganda Think Tank on AIDS

Uganda AIDS Commission (UAC) procured the services of an external consultancy to develop a discussion paper on the Think Tank approach to innovation in 2002. The generic discussion paper highlighted internationally recognized Think Tank principles, scenarios where the concept has been applied, its effectiveness and proposals on its management. The paper was widely shared amongst partners for input to contextualize the proposals to the local situation. This strategy note bases on this discussion paper and partner proposals to propose the establishment and operationalization of the Uganda Think Tank on AIDS (UTTA)

2.1 Purpose of the UTTA

The primary purpose of UTTA will be to:

- a) Promote public dialogue on key issues and consensus on common approaches
- b) Harness existing knowledge and generate strategic information to address challenges of the epidemic,
- c) Promote generation of innovative ideas to feed into policy and programme planning and implementation,

2.2 Operational arrangements

- A selected panel of individuals will embody the Think Tank for each session. This will be in form of a cross-organizational task team with mandate to produce innovation in a defined area
- This task team/panel will not be permanent or continuous.
- A new panel will be selected for each session addressing a different topic.
- Individual members can serve on different panels.
- UAC, with the support of a UTTA Technical Working Group (UTWG), will provide overall coordination:
 - Provide the secretariat for UTTA
 - Identify topics and panelists and present to partners for consensus
 - Support panelists in information gathering and preparing for the sessions
 - Organize UTTA sessions

- Manage the interface between UTТА recommendations and on-going efforts to implement national priorities. This involves lobbying for and supporting implementation of UTТА recommendations through partner efforts
- Publicity for UTТА sessions will be through the Partnership structure and through posting of printed announcements in strategic positions. High level political and policy leadership will be encouraged to attend sessions for advocacy purposes
- UTТА will initially operate at national level. Lessons learnt after a few sessions will be utilized to expand the concept and initiative to lower levels
- UTТА is a living concept that will evolve depending on feasibility of the concept

2.3 Guiding innovation principles

It is recognized that innovation requires innocence, peripheral vision, individual skills but also general knowledge of subject area. The following principles will guide the selection of panelists for each session:

- Members should have a demonstrated commitment to the national HIV/AIDS response,
- They should have a record of creative thinking in their areas of service,
- Members should not be from the same institution (or close grouping) to avoid high cohesion that might refrain vigorous exchange of opinions. They should also not feel that they need to defend their areas of interest but instead challenge the status quo to come up with new ideas,
- Individuals from strong opposing backgrounds might also not be considered to avoid conflict and desire to win arguments as opposed to listening to each other and building on each others ideas to arrive at common recommendations,
- Some level of diversity, by profession, thinking styles, constituency and gender will be promoted targeting producing more yet manageable ideas to reach consensus,
- Panelists will be given about 2 weeks to prepare, digest and develop creative ideas. Research and consultations might be necessary to allow stimulation from other ideas,
- 3 or more members will constitute a panel for each session depending on the nature of the topic.

2.4 Methodology

The following steps will be taken in the organization of each UTТА session:

- 1) UAC in collaboration with stakeholders through the Uganda HIV/AIDS Partnership, will select topics on pertinent issues about the national response according to the following criteria:
 - a. Topic selection will be informed by findings from research, program reviews and consideration of emerging/controversial issues at local and international levels,
 - b. Topics should not base on reviewing performance of a stakeholder or capacity to deliver but rather focus on problematic issues and effectiveness of given interventions.

- 2) In addition to guiding principles, selection criteria for panelists will base on:
 - a. General subject/topic knowledge,
 - b. Ability to research and consult widely,
 - c. Ability to synthesize issues, develop and present feasible recommendations.
 - d. Good verbal communication skills
- 3) Panelists will be given 15 days to understand and research about the topic and produce a 1-3 page synthesis report that highlights:
 - a. Key issues about topic (general knowledge), context in terms of how the issue has been handled at policy and programme levels, impact of interventions,
 - b. Controversial, emerging and/or underlying issues,
 - c. Possible implications if the issue is not properly addressed,
 - d. Recommendations for action at policy and program levels.

This report, submitted to the moderator 2 days before the session, will serve as a basis for a 10-15 minute presentation to other panel members.
- 4) A moderator will be selected to steer panel discussions for each session. This will be a person with:
 - a. proven meeting facilitation skills likely to generate the necessary energy among the panelists during the session, to enhance improvisation and steer sessions to consensus. He/She will not be expected to generate own ideas but to facilitate panelists to merge thinking, agree on common proposals or come up with hybrid recommendations where necessary,
 - b. good knowledge of the topic being discussed. Access to reports of the panelists should serve to refresh knowledge gaps and assist the moderator to prepare for the session,
 - c. demonstrated communication skills. Focus group moderation skills required .
- 5) Each panelist will be expected to make a presentation to the members of the panel in the presence of a wider audience. The moderator steers the debate according to UTTA guidelines. Recommendations for action are agreed on by panelists and captured there and then by a rapportuer.
- 6) The general audience does not participate in the debate but can react to recommendations when the panel session formally closes.
- 7) A synthesized report from the various reports of panelists, panel discussions and agreed recommendation will be compiled and disseminated to partners immediately after each session

2.5 Follow-up on session recommendations

UAC, in collaboration with partners through the HIV/AIDS Partnership, will:

- disseminate recommendations through various channels
- Identify lead government sectors (also members of the UTWG) linked to particular recommendations to follow-up on policy and program issues
- Advocate for action and resources to implement recommendations at various levels
- Support monitoring and evaluation of actions and outcomes

3.0 Long term proposals

It is envisaged that the UTТА concept will evolve as it is implemented. The target is to translate it from national policy level to feed into programme development and service delivery at sector, district and lower levels.

Besides partners utilizing it as a tool for generating strategic information and new ideas for their programs and activities, it can also be opened up to the general public through an ideas contest implemented through the following steps

- topics are selected in a similar way as detailed above
- public announcements are made through the media and Partnership structures with guidelines to contestants and deadlines for submission of ideas
- For each topic, a panel is constituted to vet the ideas and select the best feasible ones
- Contest winners are awarded appropriately
- Outcomes are packaged and disseminated through the follow-up process as above in 2.5

4.0 Conclusion

The Think Tank concept is an internationally proven initiative for creativity and innovation in addressing challenging and uncertain situations. The country's response against the epidemic is at cross-roads. Scaling up on existing/traditional interventions alone might not deliver expected outcomes especially given the changing environments. The UTТА therefore seeks to harness existing knowledge and potential to contribute to the national response