

April 11, 2018

Secretary-General António Guterres
The United Nations Headquarters
405 East 42nd Street
New York, NY, 10017, USA

Cc: President of the United Nations General Assembly
Chair of the UNAIDS Programme Coordinating Board
Director-General of the World Health Organization

Re: UNAIDS executive director must resign after mishandling the sexual harassment scandal

Your Excellency,

After mishandling allegations of sexual harassment and assault by senior leadership, the executive director of the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV and AIDS (UNAIDS) has damaged its reputation and is incapable of leading it. Michel Sidibé should step down immediately as the first step in reforming the management culture at UNAIDS.

The leadership transition should be followed by an independent investigation and evaluation of whistleblower and sexual harassment practices and procedures, and their strengthening across the entire UN system. Unless UNAIDS undergoes a comprehensive restructuring and leadership transition, it should be disbanded and its responsibilities transferred to the World Health Organization.

The UNAIDS mission is to lead, advocate and inspire the world in achieving universal access to HIV prevention, treatment, care and support. Its purpose is to eradicate an epidemic that spreads wherever prejudice, violence and shame displace compassion, tolerance and integrity. An investigation by the Code Blue Campaign has revealed a management culture at UNAIDS that ignores the very abuses the joint programme is trying to prevent.

By trying to avoid a public scandal, top leadership at UNAIDS lost sight of the fact that UN programs exist to serve a higher purpose. Media statements from several employees indicate there is a lack of trust within the organization. Without internal trust there can be no external credibility, which also calls into question recent developments that put a spotlight on the broader integrity of UNAIDS. The programme is under political pressure to show progress toward reaching its global 90-90-90 goals.

With the expectations of donors, Member States and civil society riding on the outcome of 90-90-90, UNAIDS has a vested interest to make its reported numbers fit the goals – but there is no impartial authority to verify the veracity of this data. AIDS Healthcare Foundation has repeatedly called on UNAIDS to initiate an independent audit of the joint programme’s reported numbers, to no avail.

A new UNAIDS executive director needs to demonstrate that the joint programme is serious about implementing comprehensive reforms that are not merely token actions meant to diffuse a crisis at a moment when the organization looks its worst.

As civil society, we will not let this scandal fade until a leadership transition takes place. Following this action, UNAIDS must establish an unshakable commitment to transparency. Whistleblowers and employees must feel safe and have confidence in bringing forth grievances without fear of retaliation from superiors.

UNAIDS frequently states the empowerment of women and girls is a cornerstone of its 90-90-90 strategy – the time has come for actions to follow words. As a condition of appointment, new leadership at UNAIDS must commit in writing to implement concrete steps that will ensure gender equality and an independent, fair process for addressing employee grievances at all levels within the organization.

Let us be clear, leadership of UNAIDS has a public obligation to “mend it or end it.” Placating civil society with consultations will not make this problem go away. UNAIDS needs to reform, restore public trust and credibility, and embrace its responsibility as the global advocacy leader in the fight against AIDS—or face obsolescence and closure. We call on you to exercise the full authority of your office as the United Nations Secretary-General to initiate and oversee these much needed reforms at UNAIDS.

Sincerely,



Michael Weinstein
AHF President