

Latin American and Caribbean Network on Strategic Planning and AIDS



REDPES



Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS

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Cover photo:
REDPES members meet in Cuernavaca in October 2001.
All photos by Ken Morrison

This case study was written by
Cristina Herrera, Ken Morrison,
Mirka Negroni and Mario Bronfman

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UNAIDS - 20 avenue Appia - 1211 Geneva 27 - Switzerland
Tel. (+41) 22 791 36 66 - Fax (+41) 22 791 41 87
E-mail: unaids@unaids.org - Internet: <http://www.unaids.org>

**Case Study
of the
Latin American and
Caribbean Network on
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and AIDS
(REDPES)**



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*Geneva, Switzerland
2003*

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No network can function successfully without building alliances and relationships with the members of other networks in the region and other key players. REDPES is no exception. We thank our sister networks, such as ASICAL, GCTH, PASCA and SIDALAC, among others. We have been accompanied in our work by many of the regional representatives for UNAIDS in Latin America and the Caribbean, and are grateful to them for their contribution.

Finally, all network members—both present and past—have voluntarily contributed countless hours of their time and invaluable expertise to expand and enrich the work of the network. They deserve and have received the gratitude of all those with whom they have worked in each country where REDPES has offered technical assistance. We add our sincerest thanks for their commitment to the ongoing struggle against AIDS. The network has benefited from their vision and courage.

Mario Bronfman
REDPES Coordinator

Acronyms

ACAT	Abogacía, Capacitación y Asesoría Técnica (Advocacy, training and technical support)
ASICAL	Asociación para la Salud Integral de los Ciudadanos en América Latina (Association for Holistic Health for Latin American Citizens)
HTCG	Horizontal Technical Cooperation Group
INSP	Instituto Nacional de Salud Pública (National Institute of Public Health)
LACCASO	Latin American and Caribbean Council of Non-governmental AIDS Service Organizations
MSM	Men who have sex with men
NAP	National AIDS Programme
NSP	National Strategic Plan
PASCA	Proyecto Acción SIDA de Centroamérica por USAID (USAID AIDS Project for Central America)
REDPES	Red Latinoamericana y del Caribe de Planificación Estratégica en SIDA
UNAIDS	Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS

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1. Introduction

REDPES is a three-year-old regional network of individuals with experience and expertise in the area of strategic planning and HIV/AIDS policy. The network was created to support and provide technical assistance to Latin American and Caribbean countries' National AIDS Programmes (NAPs) that wanted to develop a National Strategic Plan (NSP) for HIV/AIDS. The group also works with various regional initiatives that include strategic planning components. These projects include the PASCA project in Central America, the Horizontal Technical Cooperation Group (HTCG) in various countries, and the regional network ASICAL, which coordinates the Advocacy, Training and Technical Support (ACAT) project for men who have sex with men (MSM) and the Latin American and Caribbean Council of Nongovernmental AIDS Service Organizations (LACCASO). REDPES receives financial support from UNAIDS and the UNAIDS Latin American Collaborating Centre, housed in Mexico's National Institute of Public Health (INSP), provides additional financial and infrastructure support.

In the past few years, REDPES has provided direct technical support to countries¹ in the Latin American region and offered a forum for discussion to enrich and improve strategic planning efforts. Through its members, REDPES has helped develop NSPs using a multisectoral participatory approach. Often with the involvement of REDPES members, 22 countries in the region have finalized strategic plans; 7 have carried out a situation-and-response analysis and 5 others are currently doing one; 1 has taken training workshops on strategic planning; and there is also a subregional strategic planning process under way in the Caribbean. In addition, strategic planning with MSM has advanced significantly in various subregions². REDPES has also been an integral part of strategic planning for a subregional project (in Central America and Spanish-speaking Caribbean) on HIV/AIDS and human rights.

The objective of this case study is to document the REDPES experience so that it may serve as a reference guide for similar initiatives in other regions and describe the role of REDPES in promoting strategic planning for HIV/AIDS. As the only strategic planning network for HIV/AIDS

¹ Argentina, Belize, the Caribbean, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Haiti, Uruguay, Paraguay, Peru and Venezuela, and Central American countries in collaboration with PASCA. Regional strategic planning for MSM was also provided in conjunction with ASICAL.

² Andean region (workshop in Colombia), Mexico and Central America (workshop in Guatemala), Southern Cone (workshop in Argentina).

worldwide, REDPES can use the lessons learned during its brief history, challenges and accomplishments to inform the development of similar networks in other regions. This document describes the background and context of the network's founding. It provides a brief history, describing the main activities and accomplishments, noting principal problems encountered and lessons learned, and discusses the principal collaborations and strategic alliances formed to sustain the network, as well as the monitoring and evaluation mechanisms utilized. It also presents future strategies and challenges for REDPES.

What is strategic planning for HIV/AIDS?

Strategic planning for HIV/AIDS implies and includes processes and approaches that allow all those concerned—central and local governments, nongovernmental organizations and communities, national and international partners—to define strategies that are tailored to the different and changing contexts within which HIV/AIDS evolves.

A strategic planning process involves assessing and analysing the situation and the response; identifying obstacles to effective interventions and looking out for opportunities; setting priorities and objectives in priority areas; formulating strategies to accomplish these objectives; and defining targets and indicators for monitoring and evaluation. It is particularly critical to ensure at all stages of the process the participation and involvement of all relevant partners and stakeholders. This will help in securing national ownership and in mobilizing the human and financial resources needed for sustainable responses.

National strategic planning for HIV/AIDS is understood as high-level planning processes that lead to the development and implementation of programmes at different levels and in different areas. Together, these constitute a country's response to HIV/AIDS. These may include:

- National Strategic Plans or frameworks that set out a country's fundamental policies, broad strategies and an institutional framework;
- provincial-, State-, or district-level plans; and
- strategic plans addressing specific thematic areas such as care, STI prevention, drug use and vulnerable populations.

Accordingly, there are multiple levels or entry points presenting opportunities at different times for strategic approaches to HIV/AIDS planning. National strategic planning for HIV/AIDS is best thought of as a recurring process that allows countries to adapt to changing situations and to plan for and implement effective, sustainable, relevant and expanded responses.

Source: UNAIDS website: www.unaids.org/bestpractice/summary/nsp/index.html

2. Background and history of REDPES

At the turn of the century, UNAIDS estimated that 34.3 million adults and children were living with HIV and more than 18 million people had already died of AIDS. The vast majority—about 95% of those living with HIV/AIDS—live in developing countries. This proportion is predicted to continue growing in these countries where poverty, inadequate health systems, and limited resources for care and prevention fuel the virus's spread. These factors are a reality in the majority of Latin American and Caribbean countries. Although the rates of infection are much lower than in sub-Saharan Africa, where nearly 24.5 million people are infected, Latin America and the Caribbean have, respectively, 1.3 million and 360 000 people living with HIV (UNAIDS, 2000). However, within the region, the mode of transmission varies from country to country. The highest rates of infection are generally found in Central America and the Caribbean where heterosexual transmission predominates (MAP, 2000). In Haiti, the current infection rate exceeds 5%, making it the only country outside Africa with a rate of that magnitude. In South America and Mexico, on the other hand, the epidemic is largely concentrated in sub-populations, such as men who have sex with men (MSM) and injecting drug users (IDUs). In Mexico, moreover, the infection pattern is similar to that of the United States of America (USA) where the overall incidence of HIV infection has begun to stabilize somewhat in the past few years; however, the proportion of infections resulting from heterosexual and bisexual transmission is increasing, as is, consequently, the number of HIV-positive women.

While the structural adjustment process reduces government commitments to social security spending, including that on health, at the same time the greater involvement of civil society and key players³ has brought about advances in the response to HIV/AIDS. Presidential declarations and political commitment supporting the fight against HIV/AIDS have increased throughout the region, encouraging REDPES to continue to pursue its mission. For example, Argentina, Brazil and Mexico have made great efforts to mobilize resources to provide adequate care for those infected. In Brazil, as in some other countries in the region, such as Argentina, Costa Rica and Mexico, presidential decree guarantees access to antiretroviral treatment through the public health system. Such countries have reduced the morbidity and mortality related to AIDS in the past few years, illustrating the importance of strong political commitment in the face of the pandemic.

³ NGOs, community organizations, persons living with HIV/AIDS, religious groups, etc.

Since the epidemic began, governments in the region have undertaken different responses, with varying results. REDPES grew out of an urgent need to change the strategic planning process from medium-term, more 'directive' planning with low efficiency, to a focus on participatory, multisectoral planning. This change in focus allows all relevant actors to engage in the struggle and develop their commitment to fighting AIDS in their country. This new vision coincides with the consolidation of the transition towards democracy in many Latin American countries, resulting in a favourable political climate for the REDPES strategic planning approach. With this focus, REDPES' members try to balance the need to address all elements of the strategic planning process with the pressing need to deliver a finished product. Both the process and the outcome help decision-makers understand the importance of developing NSPs by clearly illustrating needs and concrete steps that allow the country to halt the spread of HIV and to provide good-quality care for persons living with HIV, in a cost-effective manner. Previously, this was not always easy.

In June 1998, the UNAIDS Latin American and Caribbean Office held an informal consultative meeting to discuss potential cooperation strategies related to strategic planning and AIDS in the region. Participants included delegates from National AIDS Programmes from Brazil, Chile and Honduras, the Liga Colombiana de Lucha contra el Sida, the PASCA/USAID project and UNAIDS. Many of the meeting's participants are now REDPES members. They reviewed progress and perspectives related to strategic planning and AIDS in the region. They also analysed UNAIDS' role in the national strategic planning process and recommended sharing experience through a network designed to provide technical assistance for strengthening the impact of strategic planning on AIDS.

A second meeting held in the region in April 1999 sought to increase the group's size and to agree on what form it should take. The group explicitly constituted itself as a network, outlining its main objectives and concrete actions in a tentative one-year workplan. The group ratified the decision that its role was neither to determine the course that National AIDS Programmes should follow nor to be dependent on them⁴. It clearly established network membership as a personal responsibility not linked to programme or organizational affiliation. The National Institute

⁴ Note that when heads of National AIDS Programmes participate in REDPES meetings, they do not participate as representatives of their government or of their programme, but as network members or observers, often belonging to the host country or subregion.

Box 1: Main characteristics of REDPES

What is it?

A **network** of persons with experience and expertise in the area of strategic planning and HIV/AIDS.

Mission

To reinforce the response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic throughout Latin America and the Caribbean

Objectives

- 1) To disseminate information that assists in the development and implementation of strategic planning related to HIV/AIDS
- 2) To strengthen local capacities, especially human resources, related to strategic planning and HIV/AIDS in individual countries.

Work methods

- 1) **Technical assistance**, usually in the form of mission visits, in countries that have requested support from UNAIDS
- 2) **Creation and/or diffusion of materials and tools** useful in the strategic planning process.

Means

- 1) **Country missions** made up of two or more REDPES members
- 2) **Internet website** (<http://www.insp.mx/redpes>)
- 3) **Electronic discussion forum** (Foro-redpes@www.insp.mx)
- 4) **Annual meetings** of all members and some invited guests present for particular events. Observers from the host country are usually also invited.

Structure

The structure is **flexible**, with a coordination centre and 25 registered members from different countries in the region.

Membership

Selectively adaptable: the minimal requirement is to have experience and to actually work on strategic planning in the region; membership is individual and not according to institutional or country representation. The coordination centre, taking into account members' suggestions, handles the incorporation of new members.

Member responsibilities

Members **agree on responsibilities at meetings**. Such responsibilities usually consist of providing material, writing documents, participating actively, maintaining active communication and attending meetings.

Coordination Centre responsibilities

The coordination centre organizes meetings, maintains the website, disseminates information and facilitates country missions.

Funding

Primarily from UNAIDS and partially from INSP, a UNAIDS Collaborating Centre.

of Public Health (INSP), recently named as one of Latin America's UNAIDS Collaborating Centres, was appointed as the network coordinating centre with defined tasks. REDPES is meant to be attentive and open to any strategic planning initiative or process in the region and to establish communication with it.

Several meetings have allowed network members to explore ways of improving network function and expanding activities. In November 1999, in conjunction with the First Central American Conference on STIs and AIDS, held in Honduras, a satellite meeting for network members was organized to evaluate network progress. This provided an opportunity to corroborate its role in the region, exchange information and experiences, and incorporate new members. During this meeting, the members insisted on the need to examine the implementation process of NSPs and establish a role for the network in this process. The group also discussed indicators for monitoring and evaluating the progress of strategic planning and AIDS. The second full network meeting was held in Guatemala in June 2000—two years after the birth of the network. This meeting was a significant milestone for measuring network progress and it allowed the group to evaluate the network programme and consider results. Members exchanged information on lessons learned, determined the next steps to be taken for incorporating new elements and designated a much clearer regional role for the network, focusing more on the implementation of NSPs.

Since then, network members have met annually, while also coming together at large HIV/AIDS events and conferences. The REDPES membership meeting for 2001 was held on 1–3 October in Cuernavaca, Mexico. During this meeting, the proposal was made to rename the network '*Red Julio Barrios de Planificación Estratégica en VIH/SIDA*', in memory of Julio Barrios, one of the founding members of the network, who died in July 2000. This proposal was approved by consensus. New network members acknowledged at this meeting included Gisela Díaz (UNDP, Venezuela), Mirka Negroni (INSP), Ken Morrison (INSP) and Outi Karppinen (UNAIDS Central America). The meeting provided members with an opportunity to exchange information and reflect about the strategic planning processes in the region, in which REDPES has participated. The members agreed to elaborate a strategic plan for the network at their next meeting, to continue planning and designing methods to follow up, monitor and evaluate strategic plans and to continue supporting thematic strategic planning processes in the region. The need for further training in political mapping was identified and a proposal made to include this topic at the next meeting of the network.

3. Main characteristics and activities

REDPES' mission is to offer technical support to countries that request assistance for AIDS-related strategic planning. Contacts are primarily, but not exclusively, via the National AIDS Programmes. The **methodological approach** is participatory, multisectoral and adapted to specific local contexts. The network's two primary **objectives** are: 1) to strengthen local capacity for strategic planning in national responses to HIV/AIDS; and 2) to disseminate information and tools for strategic planning.

To accomplish the first objective, REDPES provides technical support, in the form of teams of consultants, to countries that have requested assistance directly from UNAIDS. Generally, teams pair more senior REDPES members with junior members who are considered to be in training. The team helps to facilitate the strategic planning exercise in each country, combining various methods suited to the local context. Approximately 15 REDPES members have contributed to strategic planning processes in Haiti, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay, Venezuela and the Central American countries. This has been done in cooperation with the PASCA project, in the case of the strategic planning processes for Central American countries; with LACCASO, for the incorporation of human rights into the planning process; and with the ASICAL network, for the strategic planning processes for MSM. In order to work effectively with other players in the region, and to increase its networking capacities, REDPES has incorporated discussions of other strategic planning experiences, such as HTCG, into its meetings.

Previously, limited information on participatory strategic planning was available in the region. An official letter sent to key contacts throughout the region promoted the network initially. Subsequently, REDPES promoted the creation and distribution of strategic planning tools and other supporting documents, including the UNAIDS modules, documents prepared by different network members or other organizations or networks, and information sources. These activities were accomplished via the following:

- a website, which serves as a dissemination mechanism to the public and as a means of communication for REDPES members;
- an electronic discussion forum;
- periodic meetings between REDPES members to exchange experiences, information and knowledge and to strengthen the network;
- annual REDPES meetings involving all members.

During its brief history, REDPES has adapted to different situations and provided concrete responses in the region. While the original mandate of information dissemination and development of local capacity was clear, the concrete activities needed adjustment along the way, in response to local needs and changes in the region. Experience also showed the need for revisions in the methods for developing local capacity. In addition, the network has added ad hoc criteria, such as the requirement that consultants come from countries close to the country requesting support. This keeps operational costs relatively low.

Best Practice criteria within REDPES

Relevance: The network continues to prove its relevance through the increasing demand by countries for its services, not only in strategic planning but increasingly in implementation of strategic plans.

Effectiveness: The strategic planning process increases the effectiveness of participating NAPs by increasing their collaboration with other key stakeholders.

Democracy: REDPES is a network committed to increasing the democratization of information, both externally and internally. The members encourage processes that bring together all the key stakeholders. The network encourages learning and training on the part of all its members.

Pertinence: NAP programmes in the region have responded well to the network and often seek its expertise in their internal planning processes. Even countries that did their original strategic plans on their own are currently requesting the network's assistance in making operational plans, in recognition of the network's successes in the region.

Efficiency: The network ensures efficiency and cost-effectiveness in its work by attempting to choose from its members those closest to and most familiar with the countries involved. The two-member team approach also makes sense in terms of ease of facilitation for meetings.

Sustainability: The network operates with minimal funding, keeping costs low by working over the Internet and meeting in conjunction with other events whenever possible.

BOX 2: The REDPES country technical support process: The case of Paraguay

Background

In 1999, a representative of the Paraguay National Programme participated in a strategic planning workshop organized by HTCG in Chile. Subsequently, members of the Paraguay programme attended a training session for the ASICAL project. Independent consultants then wrote a document on the epidemiology of HIV/AIDS in Paraguay and analysed the organizational situation of the National Programme. UNAIDS agreed with the findings in these documents.

Contact with REDPES

The NAP agreed with UNAIDS, through its inter-country representative, to use the two documents in order for network consultants to write the Paraguay Strategic Plan, resulting in the first REDPES consultancy. Lengthy discussions were needed to clearly define a methodology that would satisfy national needs and be in line with the REDPES approach. REDPES encourages national programmes to write their own plan in a participatory way with the support of external consultants, rather than the outsiders writing it. The final decision involved using the documents as part of a larger participatory process to define the situation and response to HIV/AIDS in Paraguay, satisfying the national programme and maintaining the basic principles of REDPES.

Results of the first consultancy

As a result, Paraguay established a preliminary programme for the strategic planning process. The first step was to create a coordination team including members from the National Programme and from the UNAIDS Theme Group, who had been closely involved in the initial process. REDPES consultants also assisted in:

- creating a preliminary list of the sectors and actors to be involved in the strategic planning process
- building awareness of the need to involve both government and nongovernmental-sector actors
- setting a time frame and outlining activities and responsibilities
- familiarizing the NAP with UNAIDS Strategic Planning Guides
- establishing the need to hire a national consultant to support the development of documents and the publication of the plan.

Second contact with REDPES

The first Strategic Planning Workshop was held in April 2000 with more than 35 participants from diverse sectors, including those relating to AIDS, health, social security, justice, the police, prisons, universities, unions, the Peace Corps, Church Social Outreach programmes and other NGOs. Since most participants did not know each other previously, the atmosphere was a little tense. In addition to the existing documents, workshop participants also reviewed a conceptual framework of strategic planning and management, analysing problems, critical factors and possible scenarios. Discussions revolved around defining the roles of key actors as well as outlining a vision and mission statement.

The results of this group work, along with the previous documents, served as the basis for the rapid development of a draft situation-and-response analysis. It was decided to continue the process with a second workshop involving the same participants. The coordination team was encouraged to work not only on the organizational aspects of the workshop but also to proceed with the development of the situation-and-response analysis in order to have the findings ready for discussion and agreement at the meeting.

The active participation of the Theme Group (especially of its chairperson), and others who had not previously participated, greatly aided the development of the participatory process of strategic planning in Paraguay.

BOX 3: Electronic network

In June 2000, REDPES developed an electronic network that includes a website and an electronic discussion forum.

The website contains:

- **A section that is open to the general public** with general information on REDPES, published documents, REDPES meeting summaries, articles on strategic planning, links to other sites, and other information for general public dissemination. The target audience for this section of the website is decision-makers working on AIDS, academics, AIDS NGOs and the general public.
- **A members-only section** with internal documents, draft documents, mission reports, etc., considered to be internal 'grey literature'.

The Electronic Discussion Forum:

- Is **for members**, maintained by the coordination centre and based on e-mail exchanges. The objective is to facilitate the exchange of information between members and to generate critical debate and collective enterprise.

Constructing the electronic network is an ongoing process. Specialized personnel were contracted by INSP to undertake its development, including the design and production of the website. REDPES personnel and members collaborated to identify the content materials for the site. A monitoring system is under development.



REDPES members meeting in Cuernavaca in October 2001.

4. Structure and functioning

Based on the idea that a network can share skills and tools without necessarily functioning as a formal working group, REDPES has chosen a simple structure with a **coordination centre** located in one of UNAIDS' Latin American Collaborating Centres—the National Institute of Public Health in Mexico. The network is staffed by administrative and technical assistants and directed by one of the Collaborating Centre's coordinators. The network benefits from a pre-existing facility that provides a strong infrastructure including material, human and technical resources.

The network's 25 members work throughout the region. Clearly defined membership criteria distinguish between members and observers. However, the criteria are sufficiently flexible that they can be adapted to meet a specific situation. For example, a new member can be introduced by an existing member and eventually incorporated into a mission team if the situation calls for their special expertise. New members are incorporated using a snowballing technique, whereby existing members identify new members. The primary prerequisite for membership is experience and expertise related to strategic planning and AIDS in the region. Membership is based on individual merit, and not according to the organizations or countries that the individual might represent. The coordination centre, through limited consultation and consideration of existing members' wishes, is responsible for admitting new members. This is done to avoid creating a group that becomes too large to operate effectively.

The coordination centre's role is to ensure ongoing communication, facilitate country missions, organize periodic meetings for members, produce and maintain the electronic network, copy and disseminate relevant materials and ensure that members share their work with colleagues. To do this, the network has contracted personnel to support these diverse activities. In the past few years, much of the work within the UNAIDS structure, in terms of mobilizing and supporting national strategic planning in the region, has been transferred to the region via the network and its coordination centre. This has generally been considered effective and efficient, given the developments in strategic plans throughout the region.

When a specific request is made on behalf of a country, the network proposes one or two individuals to undertake the technical support mission, trying to match the country's needs with the geographic proximity of available consultants, and according to criteria related to ensuring a bal-

anced participation of consultants, with the necessary language skills. Generally a senior consultant pairs with a junior consultant to strengthen network and individual capacity through apprenticeship.

The network relies on communication support, including a centralized database, in the coordination centre. When the consultants need information, they can consult the website library or direct questions to the coordination centre. Although there is room for improvement, the communications system has so far been effective and members are satisfied with improvements to date.



REDPES members meeting in Cuernavaca in October 2001.

5. Budget and funding

The network develops annual workplans and budgets. The first proposal for these was developed in Geneva in 1998. It defined the network's goals and objectives, outlined a functioning structure, basic adhesion criteria, and means of decision-making, drafted the first workplan and prepared the first communications plan. With minor modifications, the proposal was subsequently ratified.

The network receives financial support from UNAIDS and INSP. UNAIDS supports the network with technical and financial assistance for many of its activities, including country missions involving honorariums and expenses for consultants, and network meetings (including lodging and expenses for participants). INSP provides a substantial part of the resources necessary for REDPES activities, including the salaries for coordination centre personnel who oversee construction and maintenance of the electronic network and administrative and secretarial support, as well as equipment and infrastructure. Thus far, UNAIDS has been the key contributor, with an annual financial contribution of US\$20 200.

BOX 4: Strategic alliances and collaborations

REDPES is not the only organization working on strategic planning and AIDS in Latin America and the Caribbean. Different players, when methodologically compatible, are invited to join or work closely with the network.

REDPES maintains a close relationship with the **Horizontal Technical Cooperation Group (HTCG)**—the network of National AIDS Programmes in the region—not only because some of its members belong to HTCG, but also because they are involved in joint activities that increase the impact of both networks. Both share the belief that facilitating South-South cooperation is of the utmost importance.

The **ASICAL** network, and their project ACAT (on strategic planning on AIDS-related activities for men who have sex with men (MSM)) in the region, has been concretely supported by REDPES, through various forms of technical support.

More recently, **LACCASO** (regional network for NGOs working on HIV/AIDS) has received technical support from REDPES for its planning exercises.

The **SIDALAC** initiative began developing research studies of National AIDS Accounts in five countries and, since receiving funding from the European Community, have expanded their national studies to include 20 countries in the region. REDPES was recently invited to a SIDALAC meeting to work on a joint project that will utilize these National AIDS Accounts as a mechanism to help monitor the implementation of AIDS strategic plans.

The **Second Generation Epidemiological Surveillance**—a collaborative evaluation and research project—will provide valuable information for designing, implementing and evaluating AIDS strategic plans.

6. Network accomplishments

Contributions to Strategic Plans

The network's most important accomplishment is the country-relevant products that it has developed. Among these are the national, regional and sectoral plans, completed or under way, in which REDPES has participated. Over the past two years, during the network's presence in the region, many countries have developed, and are implementing, concrete NSPs; others have completed situation-and-response analyses, while still others are in the process of undertaking these analyses. Additionally, REDPES has been involved in regional strategic planning, including the Caribbean Regional Strategic Plan that was developed and has been approved in certain countries as a platform for mobilizing additional resources. ASICAL, with members in REDPES, has its headquarters in Colombia from where it coordinates a regional, sectoral plan focusing on strategic planning for men who have sex with men (MSM). REDPES supports ASICAL workshops with consultants who help facilitate the process.

REDPES members believe that, depending on the process followed in each country, the outcome will vary and may create plans of varying quality. Plans are assessed, therefore, in terms of both the product and the process followed in their development. The plan represents a milestone for many countries, and is closely intertwined with a mobilization process. According to REDPES criteria, some plans are considered high-quality plans while others are considered 'sub-optimal', due, for example, to a less participatory process. Nevertheless, the mere existence of national plans is considered valuable as it allows for the mobilization of resources, generates a system of planning and accountability (which, in many Latin American contexts, did not exist a few years ago), provides a common focus, and promotes new initiatives. REDPES considers strategic plans to be guiding documents, open to adjustment, rather than hard and fast rules. The existence of finalized plans or plans under development constitutes a major accomplishment for strategic planning in the region.

More recently, six countries (Chile, Colombia, Guatemala, Honduras, Peru and Mexico) have developed 'integrated plans' whereby United Nations agencies come together and form Theme Groups that support the national strategic plans. These various products have been extremely relevant for national responses and REDPES members have supported and/or participated individually in the creation of several of those mentioned above. Network members have also collaborated in the development of a draft guide for supporting the implementation phase of NSPs—an area of high priority for UNAIDS, REDPES and most partner countries.

When members have been called upon to provide technical assistance for a particular country, the response has been swift and enthusiastic. The missions have most often been carried out at relatively low cost and, as illustrated in the products mentioned, have generally been considered successful. The fact that the initial agenda was coordinated and agreed upon, through both internal consultation and external observation of networks in other thematic areas and other parts of the world, illustrates some of the advantages of the network as a means of effectively responding to the epidemic. Luiz Loures of UNAIDS attributes the network's success to its philosophy: "The most important factor in its success has been its power to manage (people and resources) in a democratic fashion whereby every effort is made to value all its members".

The majority of REDPES members feel that the network is a useful mechanism for learning, for professional and personal growth, and for exchange with colleagues from the region. In the evaluation undertaken at the last network meeting, there was near-unanimous agreement that the working atmosphere at REDPES was open and democratic. All members place high value on this and emphasize the need to maintain and foster this aspect of the network.

Knowledge dissemination

The dissemination of knowledge is accomplished in a variety of ways within and outside the network. As stated earlier, having two member teams allows network members to learn from each other while ensuring better results for each country. The network has also worked on numerous publications available through the website.

The website is continually improved and enriched by the incorporation of documents and tools that are useful in the implementation of strategic plans. Among the topics covered in material added to the website are: policy analysis, National AIDS Accounts cases, evaluation of management processes, case studies, and experiences and lessons learned from the national operational plans in some countries. Some of the documents on these topics were utilized in the preparation and elaboration of the document on implementation of strategic plans edited by the network. A manual for strategic planning with vulnerable populations is being considered and various documents related to the 'Strategic Planning in AIDS and Human Rights' proposal are also in various stages of production. An implementation guide has been completed and a distribution plan is being developed.

7. Monitoring and evaluation

Although a formal evaluation is planned for 2002, a preliminary evaluation conducted at the network meeting in Guatemala in June 2000 allowed members to make a preliminary assessment two years after the network's inception. This evaluation included a group discussion and a self-administered, anonymous questionnaire, completed by each member. The group discussed the REDPES mission, objectives, methodology and role in the regional strategic planning process, as well as strategies, membership criteria, operating mechanisms, the role of the coordinating centre and members' responsibilities. In addition, the individual questionnaire addressed the network's usefulness, structure, coordination, communication systems and levels of personal involvement, asking for suggestions for the future and other comments.

BOX 5: Profile of REDPES member

CESAR CASTELLANOS

HOW DID YOU BECOME A MEMBER?

I became a member of REDPES through an invitation during the network's second formal meeting. The Team Leader of the UNAIDS Caribbean Office was familiar with my work as I had co-facilitated the strategic planning process in the Dominican Republic and other Caribbean countries. They recommended my participation in this second meeting where the decision was made to have two consultants in each mission so as to transfer skills and knowledge.

WHAT DO YOU ENJOY MOST ABOUT YOUR WORK WITH THE NETWORK?

I enjoy the possibility of sharing knowledge with many different people from different cultures and professional backgrounds. I definitely enjoy seeing how, at a strategic planning workshop, the expressions on the faces of the participants change from doubt, questioning and/or distrust in the process to clarity and certainty. Observing how a working group begins to form and how people's attitudes change—that is what I enjoy the most.

WHAT DO YOU BELIEVE IS THE IMPORTANCE OF THIS WORK?

REDPES, as a network, has been able to assist in the very important strategic planning process in various countries. A National Strategic Plan places a country under one conceptual umbrella, under which all the sectors involved in the fight against AIDS, and in favour of people living with HIV/AIDS, can design concrete activities with the certainty that they are all pushing in the same direction.

WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES OF THIS WORK?

The challenges include working with different cultures and different viewpoints. There are myriad ways of doing strategic planning and a whole host of ways of conducting a workshop. Each country has a unique political situation and a unique cultural background. The biggest challenge is supporting strategic planning in such a way that the local actors 'own' the process and understand that it does not end with the National Strategic Plan.

WHAT DO YOU SEE IN THE NETWORK'S FUTURE?

REDPES must walk beside the process it has helped to bring to fruition in each country. REDPES must expand its horizons to support countries that demand new kinds of technical assistance—for example, with their Annual Operational Plans and monitoring and evaluation of their National Plans.

8. Challenges and lessons learned

1. The recurring process of redefining the network structure and functions has sometimes caused tension for members accustomed to more formalized structures, rigid membership criteria, explicit responsibilities and tasks, and a more ordered communication system. Throughout the meetings and in the evaluation, some members expressed this concern, citing the need to more precisely define the functions, objectives, membership identification/entrance requirements and responsibilities before opening the network services to new regional partners. These points were clarified in discussions and the original structures and procedures were improved. Current consensus is that REDPES does not want to develop rigid structures with precise limits because the network functions best as a fluid and adaptable mechanism for providing consultancy services to countries that request them, usually through UNAIDS. A flexible structure seems to allow this to happen relatively easily. It is important to note, however, that, in order to function optimally, the network still expects and requires clear timelines for activities and concrete definitions of responsibilities.
2. Network meetings generate enormous energy and numerous ideas for proposals but, due to time constraints and other obligations, members are often unable to achieve all that is proposed. They are often unable to produce documents, search for materials or communicate as needed. Better coordination, the recently-launched website and the electronic discussion forum will hopefully help members work more efficiently while providing more constant validation of the network's efforts.
3. Areas of potential conflict arose almost immediately after the network was formed because of the coexistence in the region of different approaches to strategic planning and the presence of another network, the HTCG, that had strategic planning as one of its mandates. This initial tension was quickly resolved through dialogue and the integration of varying perspectives within the REDPES network. Some REDPES members now belong to both networks and the diversity of methodologies used by the two groups has been mutually enriching.
4. Another problem that the network had to deal with was an unexpected delay in the design and the launch of the website, mainly due to administrative problems.

The website should have solved a number of communication problems that occurred among network members during the first year of

operation, particularly with regard to electronic mail. But a second problem arose because members of the network were extremely busy and could not commit themselves to submitting documents and other material in a timely manner.

The communication problem was solved with the recent launch of the website. As for the delays in receiving material, it is hoped that a new production system can be established. This task should be carried out by someone in charge of editing and obtaining material in electronic form. The effectiveness of this method will be evaluated later on.

5. Network members faced challenges in handling country missions in contexts with high levels of political and administrative conflict. After some difficult experiences, members discussed how to support strategic planning processes under less-than-ideal conditions⁵. In such situations, strategic planning processes will have varying degrees of success, depending on various factors such as the political weight or openness of the NAP, its level of organization and pressure from other parties (within the NAP, from other State programmes, the Theme Group, or from civil society), and the persons driving and/or facilitating the process. It is essential that the facilitators ask themselves if the current conditions guarantee a real strategic planning



REDPES members meeting in Cuernavaca in October 2001.

process or whether the process will likely be centralized and closed in nature.

6. Outside observers participating in network meetings have occasionally reported that REDPES consultants' presentation of national cases may not accurately reflect the situation. To correct this problem, REDPES proposed inviting National AIDS Programme managers to attend meetings as observers.

⁵ Ideal conditions, according to consultants involved, include the National AIDS Programme recognizing and approving of the methodology, understanding the need to plan for the short, medium and long term, acknowledging that the response to date has not yielded the expected results, being open to incorporating other players (including those affected by the epidemic) into the process, and having access to the necessary political, economic and/or technical power. There must also be no 'highly turbulent' situations in the country.

9. The future

REDPES has set several goals for the future, including: the implementation of strategic plans; the development of integrated multisectoral plans to support national plans; and better resource mobilization at both the national and regional level. Overall, the level of political commitment to fight the AIDS epidemic is steadily increasing and, as countries move into a period of consolidating their responses to AIDS, REDPES can play a significant role in helping to shape a more effective multisectoral response.

In the future, REDPES proposes a shift from planning towards implementation as its main focus and it will place special emphasis on certain areas, such as monitoring, evaluation, and national-level capacity-building. While the network's initial focus was developing plans, more formal support of National AIDS Programmes is needed to help them develop the capacity to implement such plans. REDPES can assist, for instance, in the areas of monitoring and evaluation, so that they become an integral part of the programme, particularly now that implementation is undertaken locally. REDPES will identify areas and mechanisms to respond to these needs in concrete ways. While plans help guide advocacy and mobilize additional resources, they are not necessarily real guides for action or an end in themselves. Rather than simply developing plan after plan, REDPES needs to work on helping countries operationalize their plans.

REDPES will concentrate on providing support for areas that have, thus far, not been sufficiently addressed, including: management of NAP activities; development of key focal areas; identification of priorities; and the means for supporting decentralization. REDPES will also work to help UNAIDS Theme Groups play a specific support role in national responses, with United Nations agencies having clearly identified their commitment and responsibilities. REDPES will continue working in collaboration with other regional initiatives during the coming year. The network will hold a formal evaluation in 2002.

10. Contact information

E-mail: redpes@insp.mx

Website: <http://www.insp.mx/redpes>

Electronic discussion forum: foro-redpes@www.insp.mx

Coordinator: Dr Mario Bronfman

E-mail: mbronfman@correo.insp.mx

Instituto Nacional de Salud Pública (INSP)

Centro de Investigaciones en Sistemas de Salud (CISS)

Av. Universidad 655, Col. Sta. María Ahuacatlán,

Cuernavaca, Morelos, CP: 52508

Mexico.

Telephone: (52-777) 311-22 26/311-1140

Fax: (52-777) 311-1156

Technical Assistant: Cristina Herrera

E-mail: cherrera@correo.insp.mx

Telephone: (52-777) 311-0111, extension 2559

Technical Assistant: Mirka Negroni

E-mail: mnegroni@correo.insp.mx

Telephone: (52-777) 311-0111, extension 5914

The Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) is the leading advocate for global action on HIV/AIDS. It brings together eight United Nations agencies in a common effort to fight the epidemic: the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the United Nations International Drug Control Programme (UNDCP), the International Labour Organization (ILO), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the World Health Organization (WHO) and the World Bank.

UNAIDS both mobilizes the responses to the epidemic of its eight cosponsoring organizations and supplements these efforts with special initiatives. Its purpose is to lead and assist an expansion of the international response to HIV/AIDS on all fronts: medical, public health, social, economic, cultural, political and human rights. UNAIDS works with a broad range of partners—governmental and NGO, business, scientific and lay—to share knowledge, skills and best practice across boundaries.

REDPES—the Latin American and Caribbean Network on Strategic Planning and AIDS—is a three-year-old regional network of individuals and organizations with experience and expertise in the area of strategic planning and HIV/AIDS policy. The network was created to support and provide technical assistance to Latin American and Caribbean countries' National AIDS Programmes (NAPs) that aimed to develop a National Strategic Plan (NSP) for HIV/AIDS. As the only strategic planning network for HIV/AIDS worldwide, the lessons learned from the network during its brief existence could facilitate the development of similar networks in other regions.

This document describes the background and context of the network's founding. It provides a brief history, describing the main activities and accomplishments, noting principal problems encountered and lessons learned, and discusses the principal collaborations and strategic alliances formed to sustain the network, as well as the monitoring and evaluation mechanisms utilized. It also presents future strategies and challenges facing the network.



Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS

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Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS)

20 avenue Appia - 1211 Geneva 27 - Switzerland

Tel. (+41) 22 791 36 66 - Fax (+41) 22 791 41 87

E-mail: unaids@unaids.org - Internet: <http://www.unaids.org>