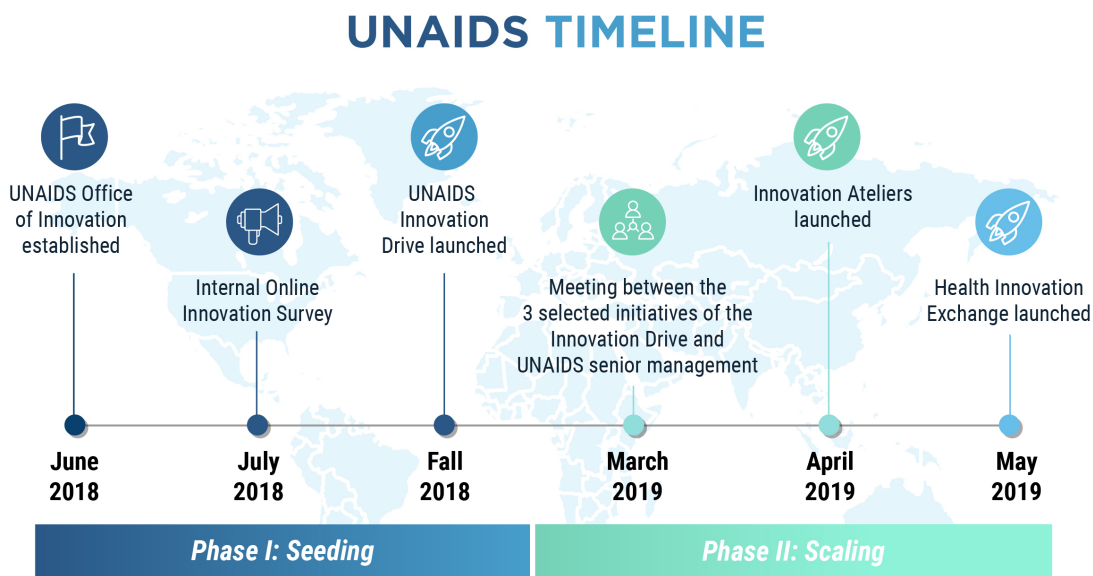




Joint United Nations Programme on HIV and AIDS (UNAIDS): The Office of Innovation at UNAIDS

UNAIDS, the first and only cosponsored joint programme of the UN system, was established in 1994 through the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) resolution to “undertake a joint and co-sponsored United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS on the basis of co-ownership, collaborative planning and execution, and an equitable sharing of responsibility.” UNAIDS consists of eleven Cosponsors: UNDP, UNICEF, UNFPA, WHO, UNESCO, the World Bank, UNODC, ILO, WFP, UNHCR and UN Women. The mission of UNAIDS is to be an innovative partnership that leads and inspires the world for achieving universal access to HIV prevention, treatment, care and support. The number of employees was about 675 in 2018 and the goal was to maintain capacity in the field, with the field-to-Headquarters ratio at 70:30.¹

The Organizational Innovation Journey



In June 2018, the third annual forum on Science, Technology and Innovation for the Sustainable Development was held at the United Nations Headquarters in New York. The forum heightened a demand for Innovation both inside and outside of the United Nations. UN Secretary General, Antonio Guterres, also called for innovation in support of the Sustainable Development Goals and started creating innovation labs, including in his office. The Chief Executive Board (CEB) meeting in April 2018 included a session on innovation, underlining the need for the UN system to focus on innovation and examining building blocks for success in it for UN entities. One of the aspects introduced was that organizations with a dedicated innovation unit generally deliver better results in this area.

Phase I: Seeding

¹ http://www.unaids.org/sites/default/files/media_asset/20180606_UNAIDS_PCB42_HR_update_EN.pdf



The UNAIDS Office of Innovation was established directly under the Executive Director in June 2018. Its mission is summarized by four key words – *Identify, Incubate, Accelerate* and *Amplify*, innovations towards reaching the SDGs and ending AIDS. The belief was that for innovation to happen, the organization needs strong top-level support, but bottom-up innovation also needs to be enabled and supported.

The team consists of four and a half staff led by Pradeep Kakkattil who has nineteen years of experience at UNAIDS and served as Director of Programme Partnerships before he took on the new role of Director of Innovation. Elina Viitanemi, a founding member of the team, had nearly ten years of experience at UNAIDS in various positions related to Global Fund Affairs, Partnerships and Fundraising.

Pradeep Kakkattil emphasized the importance of creating an innovation ecosystem within UNAIDS: “Innovation is doing things differently to have higher impact. The Office of Innovation will act as a centralized group dedicated to fostering innovation culture and to supporting ideas scale up by providing appropriate tools. Technology can be bought but the culture cannot be bought.”

For the first six months in 2018, the Office of Innovation had USD 100K from core funding, plus some non-core support for specific projects. One of the first actions of the newly established Innovation Office, in July 2018, was to conduct an online Innovation Survey among UNAIDS employees to gauge how innovation was perceived within the organization and to find out challenges and opportunities for innovation. The response rate was high with one-third of employees (208) from across regions and staff categories responding. Results showed that nearly 80% of staff felt that innovative thinking was already required in their work and the organization had a great tone at the top encouraging innovation while weaknesses included lack of resources such as in funding and staffing and lack of effective systems to make ideas happen. Three key recommendations resulted from the findings: 1) invest in building a culture of innovation; 2) encourage, incentivise, invest for innovation; and 3) staff recognition and enablers.

Based on these findings, the Office of Innovation undertook a two-pronged approach: focusing on the one hand on the innovation culture and ecosystem at UNAIDS to create an environment allowing innovation to flourish; and on the other, on fast-tracking specific innovative initiatives for the AIDS response. This followed quickly with the development of the Inn-Conversation series, a WhatsApp Group for communicating about innovation internally, and the C4SI Student Innovation Challenge, to source ideas.

Phase II: Scaling

For UNAIDS Office of Innovation, the promotion of an internal innovative mindset is as important as fostering external innovation. In this context, UNAIDS two main initiatives, the Innovation Drive 2018 and the Health Innovation Exchange addressed both internal and external innovation. UNAIDS *Innovation Drive 2018* initiated in the Fall of 2018 was a call for proposals across UNAIDS to submit innovative initiatives that would then have the potential to be funded and supported by the Office of Innovation up to USD 10,000. Proposals could be on programmatic innovations (including technology, financing, data, community, policy etc.) for the HIV response as well as organizational innovations (including systems, IT, communications, management, HR etc.) for UNAIDS as



an organization. Nineteen initiatives were submitted by employees to the team and three initiatives were selected, with a fourth one recognized with a special mention.²

In the spring 2019, the three winners met the top management (Executive Director Michael Sidibe, Deputy Directors Gunilla Carlsson and Shannon Hader) and the top management highlighted their belief in the initiatives and encouraged the Innovation Office to continue their efforts in fostering an internal innovative mindset also among country offices. This would be enabled by following a de-centralized approach towards innovation, with the support of a platform that would stimulate staff from the different country offices to present and scale their ideas. During the meeting, emphasis was also put to the need by UNAIDS to engage more the so called “digital natives,” consisting in youth population for which technology is part of their everyday life. In order to leverage the youth population who is closely connected to technology and share UNAIDS-, HIV/AIDS and public health issues-related information, the deployment of digital communication methods such as selfie videos, cartoons or Instagram influencers were discussed. According to Pradeep Kakkattil, taking into account the youth perspective is fundamental to getting away from the UN traditional mindset and approach towards current challenges.

During the first months of 2019, the UNAIDS Office of Innovation decided that its role needed to more closely match the mandate and history of the organization. The Office of Innovation leadership identified advocacy, rights and connections to governments and policy actors as the organization’s strengths. To this end, the Office of Innovation shifted its strategic role in the AIDS response - to becoming a platform and connector: firstly, by identifying innovations that could potentially deliver large-scale impact in the AIDS and UHC sphere and secondly, by connecting the innovators with the country needs and policy makers that have the tools and power to enable transformation and get funding solutions from private investors.

In this context, during the World Health Assembly, which took place in May 2019, the Office of Innovation launched the Health Innovation Exchange, a three-day event that gave “the opportunity to innovators to connect with decision-makers, investors, communities, IOs and implementers” that are potentially game-changers in the SDG3-related sphere. It included high-level panels and roundtable discussions. As Pradeep Kakkattil explained, “When you have multiple stakeholders working together, the solutions are much smarter, much better. You tap into the wisdom of the crowd.”

Part of the Health Innovation Exchange launch involved an Innovation Marketplace to showcase innovative health initiatives both to inspire and connect. A call for innovations was sent out through the UNAIDS network resulting in almost 100 submitted initiatives. Twenty-three initiatives were selected related to the fields of HIV, TB, health systems and digital health. These initiatives were ranked according to five criteria:

1. **Innovation:** The solution must clearly be an innovation, i.e. an invention or a clearly improved product/service;
2. **Values:** The solution promotes the realization of the right to health, freedom from stigma and discrimination gender equality and other human rights norms and principles in its design and intended impact;

² These initiatives included: 1) Maloza - Let's talk about sex (a set of culturally-sensitive and age-appropriated games on sexual and reproductive health); 2) Crypto mining for HIV (raising money for the HIV response though by harnessing the processing resource of UNAIDS staff, partner and supporter computers to mine cryptocurrency when not otherwise in use); 3) A mobile app to empower key population (a platform to provide coordinated real-time information, adherence support and linkage to prevention and related services for key populations in Nigeria).



3. **Potential for impact:** The solution should have the potential to deliver positive health and rights outcomes;
4. **Feasibility:** The solution should have clear potential for successful implementation in a sustainable manner;
5. **Usability:** The solution should demonstrate evidence of ease of use, replicability and durability.

The Health Innovation Exchange also marked the launch of the UNAIDS Health Innovation Exchange website which acts as the virtual component of the platform with the aim to continue fostering connections and interactions once the physical event was finished. The event was largely seen as a success for UNAIDS Office of Innovation with over 2000 participants including 52 country ministers. According to the result of a survey conducted during the event, the average rate of satisfaction was around 4.5/5.

Current Challenges and Looking Ahead

Given its recent founding, the UNAIDS Office of Innovation was still largely in the experimentation phase. Future steps the team was planning to take included identifying countries and conducting a health situation assessment from a team of external experts. This would enable the team to understand each countries' challenges and address these in the most efficient way. Other goals included developing a strategy enabling the team to work systematically with the network of innovators as well as to develop a partnership and fundraising strategy. The key for now was to keep up the momentum gathered from the Launch of the Health Innovation Exchange. Once the physical event was over and the website was live, UNAIDS Office of Innovation still had an important strategic question to decide about its future. Should we focus on only being the connector and allow the market forces to decide which innovations should go to scale or should we take an active role in allocating resources and accelerating initiatives we believe in?