

April 24, 2018

UNAIDS Programme Coordinating Board (PCB)  
20, Avenue Appia  
CH-1211 Geneva 27  
Switzerland

**Re: A Woman Should Take the Helm at UNAIDS**

Dear UNAIDS Programme Coordinating Board and global community,

With the apparent need for prompt leadership change at UNAIDS, we urge the Programme Coordinating Board and civil society to join our call for a highly-qualified woman leader to assume the executive director position at the joint programme.

UN Secretary-General António Guterres has so far failed to take resolute action at a time when his stewardship is urgently needed to launch and oversee the restructuring of UNAIDS. Delaying action and shifting responsibility will only prolong the crisis. UNAIDS cannot continue with business as usual when current leadership has lost the moral authority to lead by covering up an internal sexual harassment scandal.

Advocating on behalf of people affected by AIDS, especially those who have experienced sexual abuse and harassment, is a core function of UNAIDS. Until the organization restores internal and external trust in its mission, it simply cannot function as a credible member of the UN system.

We are disturbed by the published transcript of an [audio recording](#) from a leaked UNAIDS staff meeting where UNAIDS Executive Director Michel Sidibé sought to intimidate staff. He alluded to ongoing “investigations” into whistleblowers who highlight claims of abuse by saying, “they don’t have a moral approach” and “there will come a time for everything.”

Exacerbating the situation, Sidibé continues to epitomize ineffectual leadership by shunning any attempt towards institutional accountability. His recent efforts to strong arm support from civil society and pressuring individuals into writing letters defending him are inappropriate and an outright abuse of power.

His threatening comments and subversive actions run counter to a leader who seeks to encourage openness and to empower women or men to come forward to report cases of harassment.

These revelations come after allegations that Sidibé tried to silence reports of sexual harassment brought by several women against Luiz Loures by offering promotions and an apology from Loures. In light of these actions, it is incomprehensible how UNAIDS can repair its reputation

and justify continuing to spend millions of taxpayer dollars without implementing sweeping reforms and a leadership transition guided by an independent panel.

Sidibé's actions as Executive Director of UNAIDS and Deputy Secretary-General of the UN reflect poorly on the entire global body. Damage to its reputation comes at the expense of hardworking women and men, who dedicate their careers to upholding the ideals the UN is meant to embody – respect for human rights and a spirit of solidarity among all people.

All would agree that future incidents of sexual harassment and abuse at UNAIDS, along with any cover-up attempts, must be prevented at all costs. A commitment to restoring trust in the organization demands a fundamental shift in management culture – and what better way to empower women than to put a highly competent, accomplished woman leader with integrity in charge of UNAIDS?

We urge civil society to see beyond the flurry of crisis-management public relations efforts Geneva is pumping out to mask the scandal, a costly campaign for which taxpayers are footing the bill. Let us instead demand substantive change – an empowered woman leader and an open, honest UNAIDS.

In our line of lifesaving work there is no place for sexual harassment, cover-ups, dallying and spin. Without meaningful reforms, UNAIDS resources can be put to better use by the WHO and the Global Fund to fight AIDS around the world.

Sincerely,

Cynthia Davis  
Chair, Board of Directors  
AIDS Healthcare Foundation

Dr. Penninah Iutung Amor  
Chief, Africa Bureau  
AIDS Healthcare Foundation

Terri Ford  
Chief, Global Advocacy & Policy  
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