This historic case-study is being re-released in May 2020. It is as relevant today to the global pandemic of Covid-19 as it was to the developing crisis of AIDS when it was originally presented, 21 years ago.

LOCAL RESPONSES to a GLOBAL PANDEMIC

A Consultative Working Note
Presented by David Wasdell, Director of the Meridian Programme, November 1999

> **Developed in conjunction with the UN AIDS Local Responses Team, World Health Organisation, Geneva**.

Strategic Goal

To catalyse emergence of collective immunity to the AIDS virus at every level of the global community.

> **With breakdown of human immunity at the intra-personal level, the fall-back response to the infection depends on the development of an effective inter-personal or collective immune system. The global community has to reflect the immune response of the human organism as a complex learning system bringing global resources to bear at every point and disseminating local learning across the world.**

Some Guiding Principles

A. The battle-front is essentially human and local. It concerns the life and death of individuals in the particular circumstances of their intimate relationships, in their families, in their places of work and in their local communities.

   1. That is where the fight is won or lost.

   2. That is where the difference has to be made.

   3. That is where emotional support, medical treatment and best achievable quality of life have to be delivered to those already infected.

   4. That is where the most effective practices of protection and containment have to be applied in the lives of those still clear of the virus.

   5. That is where the spread of the epidemic has to be slowed, stopped and finally reversed.

B. Harness best possible practice of advanced learning systems in order to out-pace and out-learn the evolving epidemic.

1. There is a need for fast response across large and disparate populations in conditions which at times verge on the turbulent and chaotic.

2. The context in which learning takes place is often loaded with high and at times acute stress and distress. It is essential therefore that the learning structures are able to address the emotional or affective agenda, giving adequate support in situations which might otherwise collapse into dysfunctional paralysis of hopelessness and despair.

3. Creative learning can emerge at any point in the system, or indeed at many points simultaneously. Rapid spread of information and application across the whole system is therefore vital.

4. Global learning must be available at every point: local learning must reach the world. Local and global are mutually interdependent and mutually enriching. Every person involved in the struggle needs to know that the resources of the whole world are supporting them and that their own experience and learning are potentially a vital resource to the global community.

5. For optimum performance the system will need to operate with at least second order learning protocols (double-loop learning) throughout. In other words, in addition to the content of learning it will also pay attention to improving the learning process itself, focusing on how the learning is taking place as well on what is being learnt.

6. Traditional centre-periphery structures with isolated individuals subject to a culture of command and control and serviced by retrospective quantitative research are totally inadequate for the task.

C. Conditions are best served by combining the leading edge protocols of complexity science with the structures of advanced learning systems in order to create a distributed neural net involving:

1. **Total connectivity** between all nodes so that any element in the net can communicate with any other element without having to go through the bottle-neck of some central clearing-house

2. **Optimum interactivity** within the network. If everyone talks to everyone all the time the net quickly collapses with information overload. Conversely, if there is too little activity and insufficient information is flowing, then the learning process suffers. The key is to find the best balance

3. **Communication between the nodes** should be by the most effective and culturally coherent means available, ranging from story-telling to multi-media interactive web-sites, searchable "expert systems", and on-line conferencing

4. **High quality two-way information flow** through all linkages so that every member of the learning community can both send and receive information without the really important learning being filtered out in the process or swamped by a lot of irrelevant detail. The ability to give and receive critical feedback is also an essential characteristic of an effective learning community.

5. **Multiple parallel processing** in which problems are being worked on in many centres at once using many different approaches while sharing information in a collaborative way. This strategy speeds up the research process and enhances the probability of discovering new creative solutions

6. **Built-in redundancy** so that the failure of any element in the system does not put in jeopardy the performance of the system as a whole. Understudies, teamwork and fall-back resources are needed to guard against the possible breakdown of key people, learning centres, support and communication structures or research facilities

7. The nodes of the net require **greater resilience than can be provided by isolated individuals**. Each node should consist of a small mutually supportive and culturally coherent **Learning Team**

8. **The internal structure and procedures of each Learning Team** will be shaped by local culture and context, evolving as learning competence increases. If sufficiently high levels of participation, interaction and emotional support are to be sustained then the number of members will need to be kept lower than about ten per team. Teams of four or more members will find their learning greatly accelerated by working in sub-groups of twos and threes while occasionally meeting up with one member from each of the other sub-groups to review and improve the learning processes being used. This "matrix" structure offers a much more supportive and powerful way of learning than the single-centred small group.

9. **Ability to replicate learning nodes rapidly** throughout large populations in order to reach critical mass and spread awareness and lifestyle changes as quickly and evenly as possible. Rapid replication and spread of the "SALT" (**S**upport **A**nd **L**earning **T**eams) needs to be embedded in and coherent with the acceptable norms of local culture but could, for example, be by:

   - **Seeding**, starting a new team
   - **Budding**, emitting two or three people from a mature group to form the core of a daughter team
   - **Mating**, bringing two mature teams together and selecting two or three people from each group to combine as the nucleus of the new team

D. Learning style and the catalysis of learning

1. People learn in many different ways. It is arrogant to assume that the traditional western academic style of abstract analytic written report backed by tables of statistical research data is the only or the best way of learning (even in a traditional western academic institution!).

2. Story-telling with its vivid use of the imagination, emotional content and invitation for personal identification can root the learning in real life and is far more memorable. It is also highly motivational and leads to application of the learning.

3. The more senses are involved the more effective is the learning experience. So to words we add images, symbolism, animation and sound. The bare facts are brought to life by vivid narrative. Learning by doing is even more powerful and to action-learning we must also add the complete range of emotional life, involving the whole person in the learning experience.

   - **I hear (or read) and I forget.**
   - **I see and I remember.**
   - **I do and I understand.**
   - **I feel and I make it my own.**

Then action flows from the learning and that is what makes the difference.

4. Every member of a learning community not only pays attention to the content of what is being learnt but also to the learning process itself. The search is to find better and more effective ways of learning for every individual and for every level of the world-wide system. That is the heart of second order or double-loop learning.

5. As the learning community learns to learn better it will **identify constraints that inhibit learning** and seek ways to overcome them, letting nothing stand in the way of winning the battle against AIDS. Constraints on learning come in many forms, like:
   - Conservative clinging to old and familiar patterns of learning and living even when more effective ways are available

   - Lack of trust that makes people reluctant to share sensitive information

   - Suspicion about how it might be used and about implications for those involved

   - Inappropriate ways of gathering information that do not fit the learning style and culture

   - Lack of understanding about the value of local learning to the wider community or about the relevance of global learning to the immediate local situation

   - Filtering and suppression of learning and information that might challenge established patterns of the status quo or threaten the vested interests of powerful political or economic figures or institutions.

6. In all this the role of **the regional facilitator** is critical. In addition to being a two-way channel for information flow, **the regional facilitator is above all a learning catalyst**, continuously seeking ways to:

   - Build, maintain and develop the most effective possible learning system within their region

   - Enhance the quality and effectiveness of the learning process for themselves and for every level of the learning community

- Seek with others to overcome the constraints on learning wherever they occur

- Lead by example as a role-model of a learning person within the support of an evolving learning team.

7. **The acid test of learning** is not whether it increases our knowledge but whether it also makes a difference in the battle against AIDS: Does it change behaviour and attitudes? Does it improve the quality of life or enhance the protection against infection? In short, does it increase the collective immunity against the virus and its effects?

E. Principles and methodologies of research

1. Research is never an end in itself. It must always be (and be seen to be) a means to the end of making a difference in the battle against AIDS.

2. If learning is about making a difference, then research is about monitoring what difference is made, analysing how the difference was brought about and finding better and faster and more cost-effective ways of making the difference.

3. The whole learning community is continuously involved in research while also constantly seeking better and more effective ways of carrying out research. In other words the research activity itself is subject to second order learning processes.

4. It is inappropriate to limit research to one particular method. The whole spectrum of research methodologies must be brought to bear, orchestrated in the most appropriate and effective way. So for instance:

- Statistical monitoring of key factors at every level of the world community

- Retrospective measurement and evaluation of the consequences of particular interventions and developments

- Building of best possible computer models which can become the basis of forecasting changes in the situation so enabling scenario planning and proactive response. It is much better to be prepared in advance than to react after the epidemic has spread and been subject to years of retrospective research.

- Quantitative and qualitative methods are complementary, not mutually exclusive. Listening to the stories, the personal accounts and the anecdotes is essential if that local innovation or point of creative problem-solving is to be captured and its potential realised across the whole community.

- At the other end of the scale is the network of pharmaceutical, chemical and bio-technology companies, the university and government departments and laboratories searching for breakthrough in terms of treatment and prevention of spread of the infection. Here patterns of competitive secrecy driven by commercial greed or power and status seeking must not be allowed to inhibit the open sharing of information in the global collaboration demanded in response to the HIV epidemic.

In conclusion, the neural network of the learning community needs the capacity to develop, grow, spread and evolve throughout the whole population even more effectively than the virus itself.

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Contemporary Postcript

In the evening of 8th May 2020, we struggled with the complex emotions of the 75th anniversary of VE Day, in the midst of the chaos, grief and confusion of Covid-19. Then a little moment of insight moved me to tears.

Speaking on Any Questions [BBC Radio 4], Andy Street, the Mayor of the West Midlands, responded to the issue of how best to organise the task of track and trace as we move into the next phase of the Covid-19 pandemic. He said

> '… a devolved approach might bring about a better outcome'.

Then he continued:

> '… You might think this is an odd comparison to make. Think of South Africa – a country we probably all would have said, at the beginning of this epidemic, would be incredibly vulnerable. They have come through it really well. How have they done it? They have used their army of local tracers, who were there actually to deal with the AIDS epidemic, … they have the local knowledge and were able to bring it to bear and they have turned it to this. So there is evidence that local knowledge on the ground has helped hugely and we can learn from that.'

The successful containment of the slow-moving AIDS pandemic offers clues for our response to the faster moving Covid-19. It holds pointers for future strategy for every country across the world.

My earlier engagement with the UN AIDS Local Responses Team of the WHO laid the ground for my subsequent invitation to serve as facilitator and process consultant to the World Health Organisation as a whole, as (in November 2003) it reviewed the strained saga of its reaction to the SARS pandemic. The complex learning from that event laid the foundations for its strategic response in this current crisis.

David Wasdell
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