

The Geneva Principle:

Bringing all stakeholders to the table

After a decade or more of evolution, and occasional struggle, the co-organisers of the World AIDS Conference series have adopted a formal mechanism for sharing major decisions about the biennial event.

"The Geneva Principle simply states that all the organisations that represent one of the constituencies that make up the AIDS community should have an equal say in determining the structure and content of the programme," explains Conference Chair Bernard Hirschel. "That means all the important decisions are taken in concert, and the committees that decide the programme have had re-

presentatives of all the co-organisers."

The impact of the Geneva Principle was first felt in the programme subcommittees, where a broader range of participants worked to select and prioritise abstracts. "After some initial tensions and difficulties, the committees worked extremely well," Hirschel says. "I think everyone was surprised at how harmoniously the process went. I would certainly recommend a similar structure for future World AIDS Conferences."

Even in the years when scientists and physicians were careful to build links with community organisations, "they still called the shots and held the decision-making power. What's different in Geneva is that a consensual basis for decision-making was agreed upon in advance, and nothing else happened before that was decided."

The resulting mix of scientific and community participation was captured in a pre-Conference poll of 500 participants, to determine how many would attend each of the two plenary sessions Thursday morning. The poll showed that 71% planned to attend the scientific session, while the remaining 29% said they would be present for the social science/political panel.

"This reflects quite faithfully the make-up of the participants," Hirschel remarks. "The biomedical community is the majority, but not the whole Conference, and most of them realise that HIV/AIDS has all these social, political and prevention aspects that are very important."

Robin Gorna, Chair of the Community Planning Committee, says the Geneva Principle has created new opportunities for community nominees and scientific experts to shape the Conference programme together. She notes that a great many HIV-positive people have trained themselves to a high level of excellence in Track A and B science, and have something important to bring to the Conference process. "Everyone in the community wants the science to develop the drugs to make people better. But sometimes we ask the questions in a slightly different way."

By the same token, scientists' participation in designing the skills-building programme has encouraged community representatives to consider new session topics, and to frame questions more rigorously. "We're

making the community work, and I think that's right and proper," Gorna says. "We're moving beyond the dichotomy between science and community that we had in the early days."

Richard Burzynski, Executive Director of the International Council of AIDS Service Organisations (ICASO), characterises the Geneva Principle as a means to open an important new door for the community sector.

In the past, "unless we've debated and made space and forced space to be opened for us, that space has not been created to the satisfaction of the

vast majority of people," he says. "When it comes to other methods of organising and learning, we've had to play second fiddle. Many of us from the community sector have had to fight tooth and nail to open that kind of space up."

Prof. David Cooper, out-going President of the International AIDS Society, said the Geneva Principle was intended to establish the tone of the 12th World AIDS Conference, and to set the agenda for future events in the series. "We feel it's an admirable principle, and that it should be given a fly to see how it works."

The Bridge is the official daily newspaper of the 12th World AIDS Conference. It appears each morning of the Conference, to provide a snapshot of onsite sessions and a forum for discussion of key Conference issues.

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Opening speakers Ruth Cardoso and Guy-Olivier Segond get acquainted before a press conference.

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Dreifuss called for partnerships between the fields of prevention, treatment, biomedical research and behavioural science. "A condom a day keeps the doctor away," she said, quoting a billboard that is omnipresent at the Palexpo site. "This is the only opposition between prevention and the medical community that is acceptable."

Community Planning Chair Robin Gorna stressed that "community mobilisation and action have released the political will and the funds to pay for research, treatment, education and care." At this Conference, "we're beginning to see

real hope that we can raise the standard of available care and get drugs into bodies."

The Opening Ceremony was interrupted mid-way by ACT-UP members, carrying a banner that read AIDS: The World Is Burning. Koua Desiré N'Dah, an activist from Côte d'Ivoire, noted that "the majority who are sick have no access to treatment – not even the simplest and cheapest medications are available." Politicians promised six months ago to free up funding for treatment in the South, amid calls for the formation of an African solidarity fund. But "today, the money still isn't there."