

Moment of Truth: Action and accountability from the Global HIV Vaccine Enterprise

In each of the past five years, AVAC has assessed and made recommendations for the Global HIV Vaccine Enterprise. We are both a member and a watchdog of the Enterprise, and we'd like to think that all of its members have similar, dual roles. Being part of a collective includes the responsibility to make sure it fulfills its mission.

In that spirit, we've made observations every year about what we'll be looking for in one year's time and in the medium and long term. We've placed benchmarks for the Enterprise as a whole and for the secretariat, recognizing that it needed time to establish itself and staff up.

One of the major milestones we have been tracking is the revision of the Scientific Strategic Plan, which was first published in 2005. The purpose of the Plan is to provide a field-wide agenda that guides funders, minimizes duplication and ensures that the field's myriad stakeholders work in synch.

As *AVAC Report 2010* went to press, a summary of the Plan was in production for release at the upcoming International AIDS Conference in Vienna. A full version of the Plan was slated to be published in September 2010. The big question for all of the Enterprise stakeholders will be whether the drafting process will yield a Plan that is worth the considerable cost and effort that went into it. The metric for evaluating this is whether the updated Plan stimulates substantive action in the funding priorities and research goals of Enterprise stakeholders.

The paper document alone cannot effect this change. The secretariat, under the direction of Alan Bernstein, must drive execution of the Plan. It should hold accountable the full range of stakeholders, including donors, scientists and organizations, for matching their work to the Plan's priorities with urgency.

Whether this will happen is, to be frank, an open question—and one that we'll be tracking closely in the coming months, since it cuts to the heart of whether the Enterprise secretariat and its stakeholders are meeting expectations.

The good news is that a range of activities, large and small, is being animated by the spirit of collaboration envisioned by the authors of the original Science article calling for the Enterprise. Stakeholders are working together more efficiently and with greater transparency, and funding has been directed to some of the specific priorities identified in the original Plan of 2005.

The collective field has made important progress towards achieving many of the original Enterprise scientific goals, like broadening exploration and understanding of early events in infection and creating systems for broader collaboration and communication. This has happened because of the good will and strenuous efforts of its members and because donors aligned their funding with areas that Enterprise members identified as priorities.

Even with these advances, the field still requires a Plan that emphasizes activities and initiatives beyond those that are already ongoing or planned. It needs an ambitious vision for how the field should seek to build upon the RV144 result and, at the same time, pursue a strategic set of future activities that take the field in new directions. The Plan doesn't need to provide the specifics of the scientific agenda, but it should suggest structures and provide the leadership needed to accomplish these aims.

It also needs to articulate how the AIDS vaccine field can continue strategic growth under constrained funding and backlash against AIDS exceptionalism. If the Enterprise cannot effectively champion judicious spending and tough decision-making, then who can?

But while the Plan itself, and the process to create it, are important, the process by which the Plan is implemented, monitored and updated will matter the most in moving the field forward. And, since responsibility is shared and individual partners choose which aspects of the Plan to address, mechanisms must be put in place to prevent important components of a complete program from being deferred or relegated again, as was the case with many of the recommendations from the 2005 Plan.

We recommend the following actions after the final Plan is released:

- The Enterprise secretariat take ownership for leading the field to implementation of specific aspects of the Plan and set formal timelines for achieving progress.
- The Enterprise, through the secretariat and its governing Council, develop a comprehensive and ambitious strategy for identifying new funding sources.
- The Enterprise secretariat, with guidance and input from the scientific working groups, identify three to five specific, time-sensitive issues that could be resolved or refined by small meetings, with recommendations and Enterprise-led follow-up on deliverables.
- Each Enterprise member articulate how their funding and/or scientific decisions are aligned with the Plan, or deliver a critique of the Plan to articulate why not.

We at AVAC will publish an end-of-year comment on the new Plan, with specific recommendations on how it could be operationalized and monitored.

The Enterprise remains an entity that belongs to all of us. Progress and success are a collective responsibility.

More will always need to be done, but there is some momentum to build upon. And it's time—if not past time—to rigorously evaluate if and how the Enterprise, as a collaboration and as a supportive organization, has the ability to do so.