



**Social Aspects of HIV/AIDS Research  
Alliance (SAHARA)**

# **STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK 2008 - 2010**

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## Objectives of the Strategic Framework

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This strategic framework epitomizes the fruit of teamwork and collaboration throughout the SAHARA network. It embodies efforts to address the recommendations of major management and program reviews of SAHARA, and draws largely from previous strategic planning exercises undertaken to put SAHARA on a path of sustainable growth and success.

Its objectives are to:

1. Articulate the vision, mission, strategic directions and objectives of SAHARA.
2. Clarify the roles of the SAHARA Head Office and SAHARA Regional Offices.
3. Identify the priorities and strategies needed to achieve the objectives, as a basis for the Establish a link between the strategic plan, the operational plan, budgeting, and measurement of results and progress
4. Build a shared sense of purpose and identity among staff, stakeholders, and partners
5. Direct all SAHARA research and resources and help guide other social science research and resources in sub-Saharan Africa in making the greatest contribution to SAHARA's objectives.
6. Enable SAHARA to work with other members of the research community on a broader scale and across local and national boundaries in responding to the ever-more complex social issues in the fight against HIV and AIDS.
7. Provide a mechanism for leveraging the science and resources of SAHARA in an integrated fashion, and to assure accountability in SAHARA's research programs.
8. Support SAHARA's commitment to collaborative stewardship, both with its partners and within its workforce, enabling the production and distribution of a social science evidence-base for policy and action in the fight against HIV and AIDS.

The detailed components of the strategic framework include: vision, mission, core functions, objectives, philosophy and guiding principles for the work of SAHARA, governance structures, core research areas, and a strategic management process.

## **The Context**

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The HIV and AIDS epidemic constitutes a global health emergency of unprecedented proportions. At the end of 2005, 38.6 million people globally were estimated to be living with HIV. Another 2.8 million people were estimated to have lost their lives to AIDS in the same year.

In 2003, the gap between the number of people living with HIV and needing treatment and those with access to treatment was recognized as a global public health emergency by WHO, which launched the "3 by 5" initiative on World AIDS Day in 2003. Between 2003 and 2005, the number of people on anti-retroviral therapy in Sub-Saharan Africa increased more than eight-fold from 100,000 to 810,000, and more than doubled in 2005 alone.

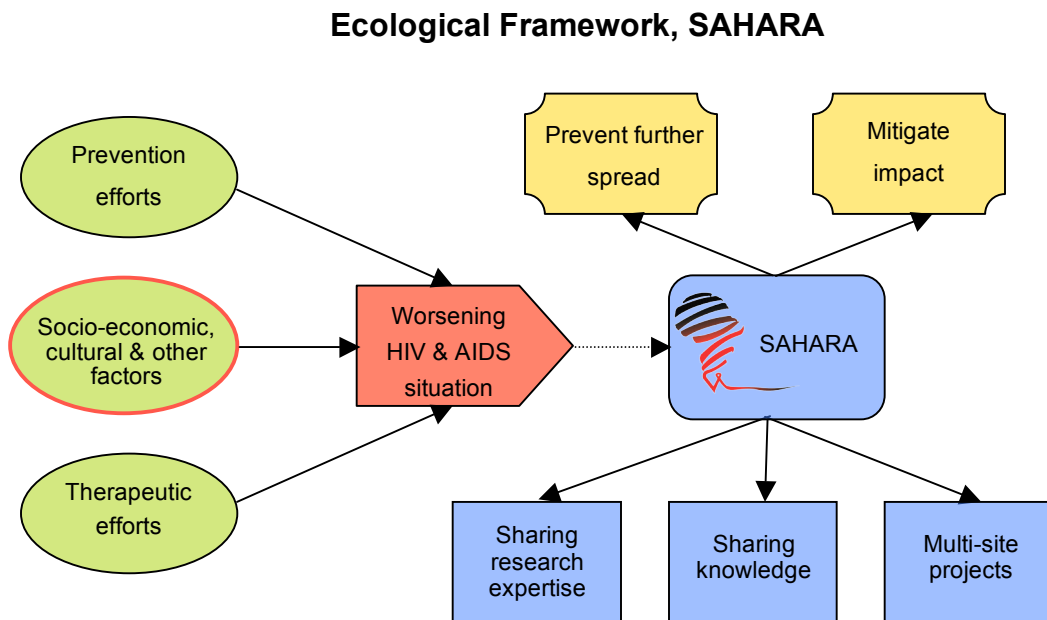
At the same time, funding levels for treatment substantially increased as a result of initiatives such as the United States President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief and the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, TB and malaria. Current prevention efforts (including condom social marketing and use, clean needle distribution, voluntary counseling and testing, preventing mother-to-child transmission, preventing and treating sexually transmitted infections, making blood supplies safer, and now male circumcision, etc.) have also continued.

In spite of these efforts by national governments and development partners, AIDS remains an incurable disease, and continues to worsen, with an estimated 4.1 million people newly infected every year.

With such numbers, there are serious and fundamental questions about the lack of change in sexual behavior. The biomedical approach to HIV and AIDS is clearly not

adequate, and much needs to be understood about the nature and magnitude of social risks of HIV and AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa and how to reduce them.

That is the reason that the Human Science Research Council of South Africa (HSRC) established SAHARA in 2002 as an alliance of partners who use social science research to prevent further spread of HIV and mitigate its devastating impact throughout sub-Saharan Africa.



The HIV epidemic impacts all sectors of society and all aspects of social development, including education and skills training, poverty alleviation, nation building, and rural and urban development. SAHARA serves as a tool for expressing the strategic focus of the HSRC towards Africa in the area of HIV and AIDS, thereby extending the frontiers of HSRC research programs beyond the borders of South Africa into the rest of sub-Saharan Africa.

It is a vehicle for facilitating the sharing of research expertise and knowledge, and for conducting multi-country research projects with the aim of generating new social science evidence for prevention, care and impact mitigation.

## **Vision, Mission, Core Functions and Objectives**

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**The vision** of SAHARA is the reduction in the number of new HIV infections and a reversal in the spread of HIV through the promotion of collaborative research and the effective dissemination of research findings to decision makers and various SAHARA publics.

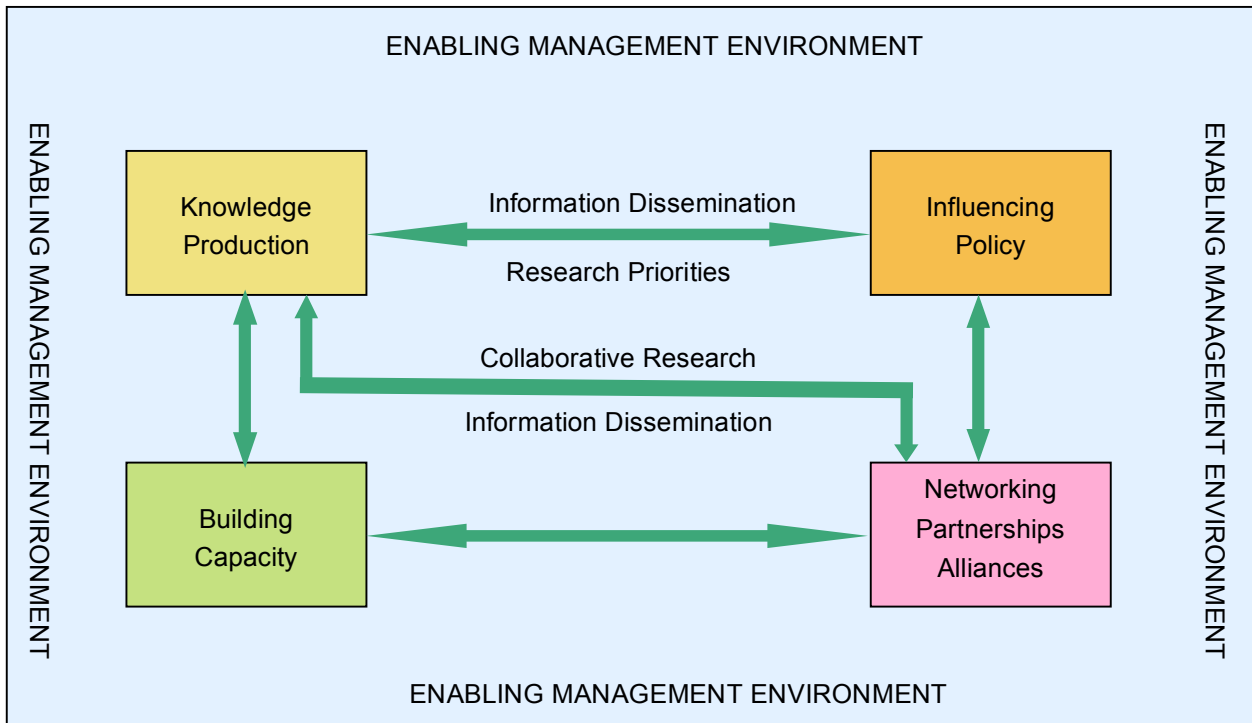
To achieve its vision, SAHARA: undertakes multi-country and multi-site research, which enables it to make a significant contribution to evidenced-based policy formulation and practice; widely disseminates research results through its network of researchers, policy makers and practitioners; and supports advocacy to ensure the translation of research evidence into policy and responses.

**The mission** of SAHARA is to bring together key partners (civil society, donor and international organizations, researchers, policy makers, and people living with HIV and AIDS) to influence policy and responses through the production and dissemination of evidence-based research on the social aspects of HIV and AIDS.

To achieve the above mission, SAHARA activities during the three-year period will be in accord with the following **core functions**:

- Generating social science research evidence and options
- Influencing policy through dissemination of evidence-based information to, and strategic advocacy with, decision makers and relevant SAHARA publics
- Building partnerships and alliances
- Building capacity for high quality social science research
- Creating an enabling management environment

## Core Functions of SAHARA



The following **objectives** will form the basis for the development of a 3-year expenditure framework and annual business plans, and guide the activities of both the SAHARA Head Office and the three Regional Offices during 2008-2010.

- To establish and facilitate research networks, partnerships and alliances on the social aspects of HIV and AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa
- To generate scientific material in the area of social aspects of HIV and AIDS
- To widely disseminate evidence-based information and best practices on the social aspects of HIV and AIDS to decision makers and various SAHARA publics through conferences, policy dialogues, and the SAHARA information system (including the SAHARA Journal, the SAHARA website, and the SAHARA database)
- To facilitate women's participation in decision-making in academic and research institutions

- To maintain a management system that facilitates the implementation of SAHARA's strategies and the achievement of its objectives, including a comprehensive monitoring and evaluation regime and integrated supporting systems in the areas of financial accounting, program planning, budget preparation, work planning, implementation and reporting
- To build and sustain capacity in sub-Saharan Africa for high-quality research, analysis, and intervention on the social aspects of HIV and AIDS.

## **Philosophy and Guiding Principles for the Work of SAHARA**

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The following principles provide the core foundations for the work of SAHARA at all levels.

- **One SAHARA**, based on: **Solidarity**; **Teamwork**; **Sharing** of responsibility, information on opportunities, threats, and best practices, which commits SAHARA network members to work in partnership to achieve the goals of SAHARA as well as commitments made to one another in the search for solutions to the HIV and AIDS pandemic; and **Mutual respect**, which is crucial for effective communications, building and maintaining trust, and developing partnerships to achieve the ideals of SAHARA. Respect includes respect for the values of the communities, protecting and empowering social institutions, not violating the decisions of the legitimate authorities of the communities, and respect for the scientific method and the scientific and ethical integrity needed to achieve valid and acceptable results.
  - No level of SAHARA can work effectively and successfully in isolation. There must be continuous dialogue and interaction, as well as cohesiveness and consistency in approach.
- **Transparency and accountability** (in both financial and programmatic terms) at all levels, which encourage strategic communication and open dialogue.

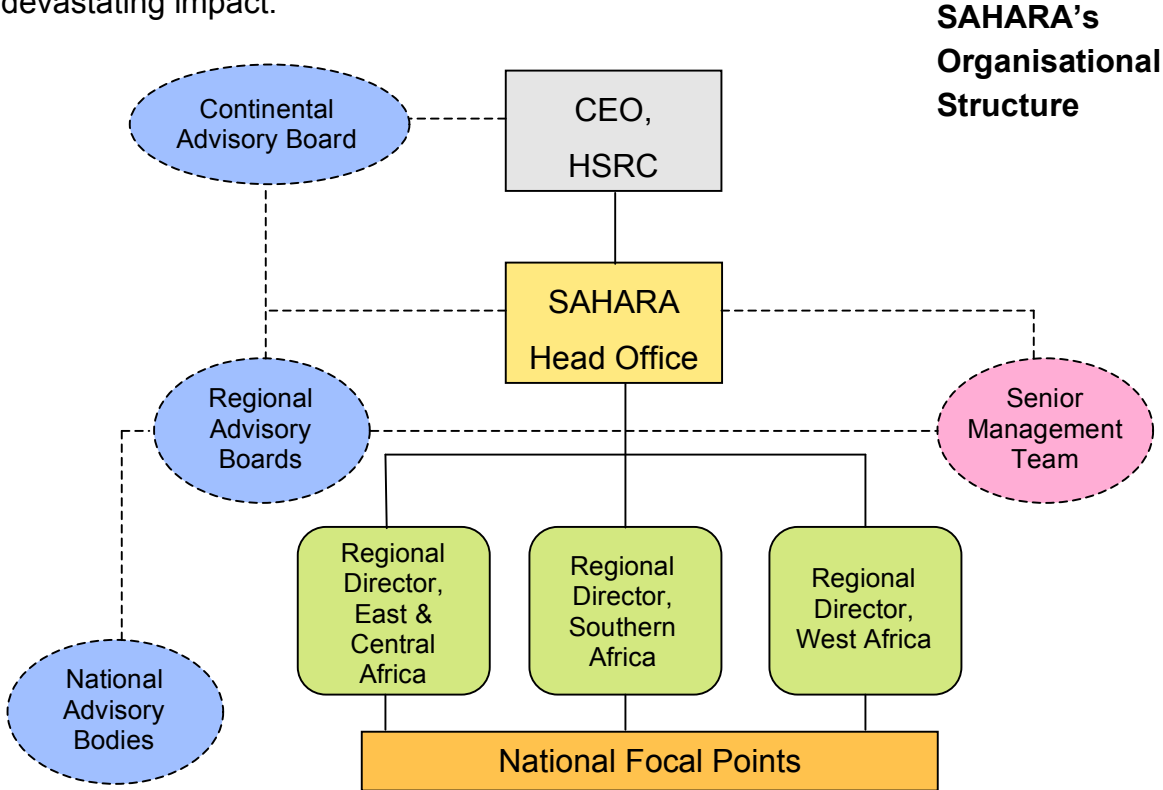
Financial and program information is maintained in a manner that is readily available, and communicated in a timely fashion. Research protocols, including plans for data collection and analysis, interpretation of findings, and dissemination of results, are discussed at the outset with collaborators and communities at the regional and country levels, taking into account, when necessary, the need to maintain the confidentiality of proprietary and other information.

- It is essential to have **African solutions for Africa's problems**, including research-based African solutions to the African HIV and AIDS epidemic. SAHARA is a tool for expressing one of the strategic orientations of HSRC – its strong Africa focus.
- **Decentralization** and regional approaches for greater results. Although SAHARA's work is important at the continental and regional levels, the relevance of its work is most crucial in the countries through the national focal points.
- **Scientific and ethical integrity:** Safeguarding the highest level of scientific and ethical integrity (including adherence to the universal ethical principles of respect for persons, beneficence and justice) is central to the research efforts of SAHARA. The will, autonomy, and privacy of the individual, as well as their personal, cultural and social values should be respected in the search for solutions to the pandemic. This is important in order to maximize benefits for the study participants and communities, and advance science in the interest of HIV prevention and control in Africa.
- **Gender** as a social and cultural construction is regarded as critical to any understanding of HIV and AIDS.
- The logic of **cooperation and collaboration**, which has become the mantra of both the Africa Union (AU) and the New Partnership for Africa's Development

(NEPAD) in the quest for solutions to Africa’s problems, is also applicable in the continent’s higher education and advanced research communities. SAHARA, therefore, finds impetus in the realization that cooperation and collaboration in social science research between African Member States, academic and research institutions, researchers, scientists, activists, policy makers, continental and regional inter-governmental institutions and communities, NGOs, business and religious organizations, and other stakeholders are crucial in generating evidence needed for HIV and AIDS policy, planning and implementation. This provides a strong imperative for multi-site, multi-country studies that would yield results that can be generalized throughout Africa.

**Governance Structures of SAHARA**

The **strategic Identity** of SAHARA is one of a flexible, loosely structured and decentralized network of regional and national partners (including policy makers, program planners, researchers, NGOs, community groups, donors and multilateral agencies) who use social science research to prevent the spread of HIV and mitigate its devastating impact.



Achievement of the mission, objectives and activities of SAHARA are governed by a structure which includes: a Continental Advisory Board; Regional Advisory Boards and relevant Committees; a Secretariat that includes a Head Office and three Regional Offices; and a network of national focal points.

### **Continental Advisory Board**

The group is multi-disciplinary and comprised of high profile HIV and AIDS experts who represent the following institutions: donors, civil society, researchers, continental inter-governmental organizations and communities, people living with HIV, international organizations, business and religious organizations, and other key stakeholders. It provides leadership and direction through appropriate mix of skills, experience, credibility and demographic diversity on the work of SAHARA.

Under its terms of reference, the board:

- provides strategic direction to SAHARA on all aspects of its work;
- provides advise to SAHARA on issues related to HIV and AIDS research, priority research areas in Africa, and mechanisms for expanding and consolidating the network;
- provides the latest expert knowledge on issues related to HIV and AIDS research which will inform the present and future research projects;
- reviews reports on the work of the SAHARA network at all levels, and makes recommendations; and
- supports advocacy with policy makers and relevant stakeholders (including civil society organizations) in the application of social science research evidence in policy and responses.

The board meets at least once a year.

### **Regional Advisory Board**

Each of the three SAHARA Regional Offices is guided by a Regional Advisory Board, a multi-disciplinary group of high profile individuals in the regions in the area of HIV and

AIDS, representing the following institutions: donors, civil society, researchers, regional inter-governmental organizations and communities, people living with HIV, international organizations, business and religious organizations, and key regional structures. The board provides leadership and direction through appropriate mix of skills, experience, credibility and demographic diversity to the work of SAHARA in the regions.

According to their terms of reference, the board will:

- Provide advise on the policy and strategic directions and priorities of the SAHARA regional network, and review the strategic, medium-term and annual plans and budgets;
- Help the SAHARA regional office in establishing a research agenda and priority research areas for the region, including: understanding the social, political and economic factors that influence research and uptake into policy; providing advice on emerging issues; advise on regional, national and local priorities, opportunities, and constraints relevant to research and capacity-building activities; and advise on measures necessary to feed research findings to policy making processes;
- Review reports on work done in the region, and make recommendations;
- Provide advise on mechanisms for expanding and consolidating the network in the region and at the country level;
- Provide the latest expert knowledge on issues related to HIV and AIDS research to inform the present and future research projects embarked on;
- Identify opportunities for dialogue with sub-regional, regional, and national policy makers; and
- Conduct advocacy for SAHARA programs and activities in the region, acting as “local champions” for the SAHARA Regional Office in maximizing the impact and profile of SAHARA, and the involvement of end-users in the research and knowledge translation processes.

Each regional advisory board meets at least once a year, and shall establish such other committees and sub-committees as are necessary for the effective conduct of its work.

## **SAHARA Secretariat**

The SAHARA Secretariat is composed of: a Head Office; 3 regional offices for East and Central Africa, Southern Africa, and West Africa; and a network of national focal points.

Headed by a Director, the **SAHARA Head Office** is responsible for overall management of the SAHARA network; donor liaison and fundraising; communication and dissemination of information and best practice; development and maintenance of partnerships, alliances and networks; capacity development; convening of meetings and conferences; and strategic coordination of multi-country projects. In the area of project coordination and facilitation, its specific responsibilities include:

- Formulating funding proposals for multi-country projects;
- Liaison with funders;
- Assisting in obtaining consensus and buy-in from partners and collaborators at the country level at various stages of proposal development and finalization, including agreement on issues to be addressed by the project and envisaged activities;
- Ensuring proper and timely conformance with national ethical requirements;
- Coordination so that no country is "out of step", and to enhance standardisation of approaches (to the extent possible) and comparability of findings;
- On-going communication with partners at the country level to ensure a feeling of involvement;
- Regular monitoring of progress to ensure that activities are implemented as planned and reports submitted to funders accurately and in a timely manner; and
- Disseminating research findings to study participants, affected communities, participating grassroots-level NGOs/FBOs, local government departments and structures, researchers, regional and national policy makers, and HIV advocacy groups in an appropriate and targeted manner.

SAHARA has projects and networks in at least 26 countries in sub-Saharan Africa, coordinated by a network of **regional offices**. Each regional office is headed by a

Regional Director, responsible for the following major functions within the region: undertaking and coordinating research on the social aspects of HIV and AIDS; disseminating research results to relevant publics; developing and sustaining the SAHARA network; and developing capacity for high quality research on the social aspects of HIV and AIDS.

Each regional office also coordinates a network of **national focal points** whose overall functions are to participate in collaborative research, support, stimulate and facilitate networking in their respective country. Specific terms of reference include:

- Promoting policy dialogue and influencing agenda-setting in national processes where the voice of social science needs to be heard and where an imperative exists for follow-up action;
- Fostering an alliance on the social aspects of HIV and AIDS, linking local efforts for greater impact;
- Sharing information;
- Build support for individual researchers and a research community capable of contributing to the use of social science research in the fight against HIV and AIDS;
- Organizing and facilitating policy and multi-stakeholder dialogues in the countries to ensure that results of research conducted within the SAHARA network get into the hands of end users. This includes bringing stakeholders together in formal and informal interactive meetings;
- Promoting and participating in research on the social aspects of HIV and AIDS. They may serve as the primary program instrument through which are generated research questions (on the social aspects of HIV/AIDS) which are deemed locally to be of national priority concern;
- Developing and maintaining databases of who does what and where in the country, regarding the social aspects of HIV and AIDS.

The activities of the national focal points will be governed by national advisory bodies, with suitable composition and terms of reference.

## Core Research Areas

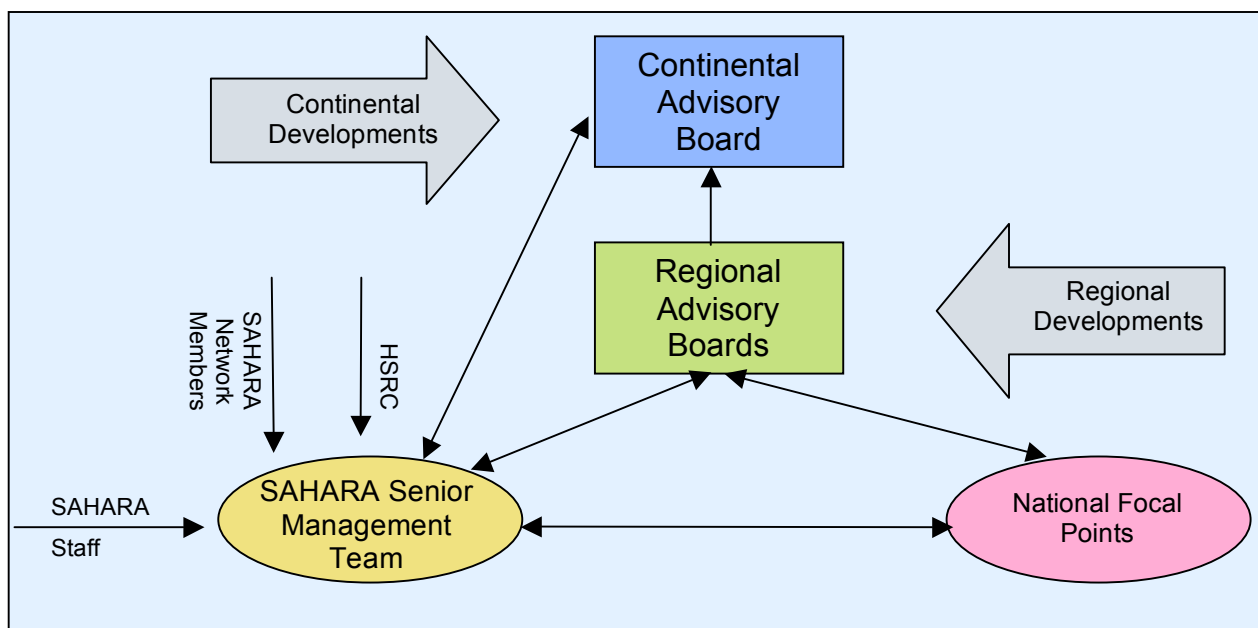
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To ensure focus, relevance and maximum policy impact on the social aspects of HIV and AIDS, SAHARA's collaborative research agenda for the next three years will focus on the following areas:

- OVC interventions and care, including community-based support systems for vulnerable children, and the challenge of how to prevent or delay orphan-hood
- Stigma and disclosure, particularly among pregnant women
- Gender violence and HIV risk reduction
- Alcohol and HIV risk reduction
- Barriers and readiness for male circumcision as an HIV prevention tool in cultures that do not circumcise their males
- Culture and AIDS
- Social Aspects of HIV vaccines

SAHARA's research priorities are established and renewed following a well-defined research strategy and a clear consultation process.

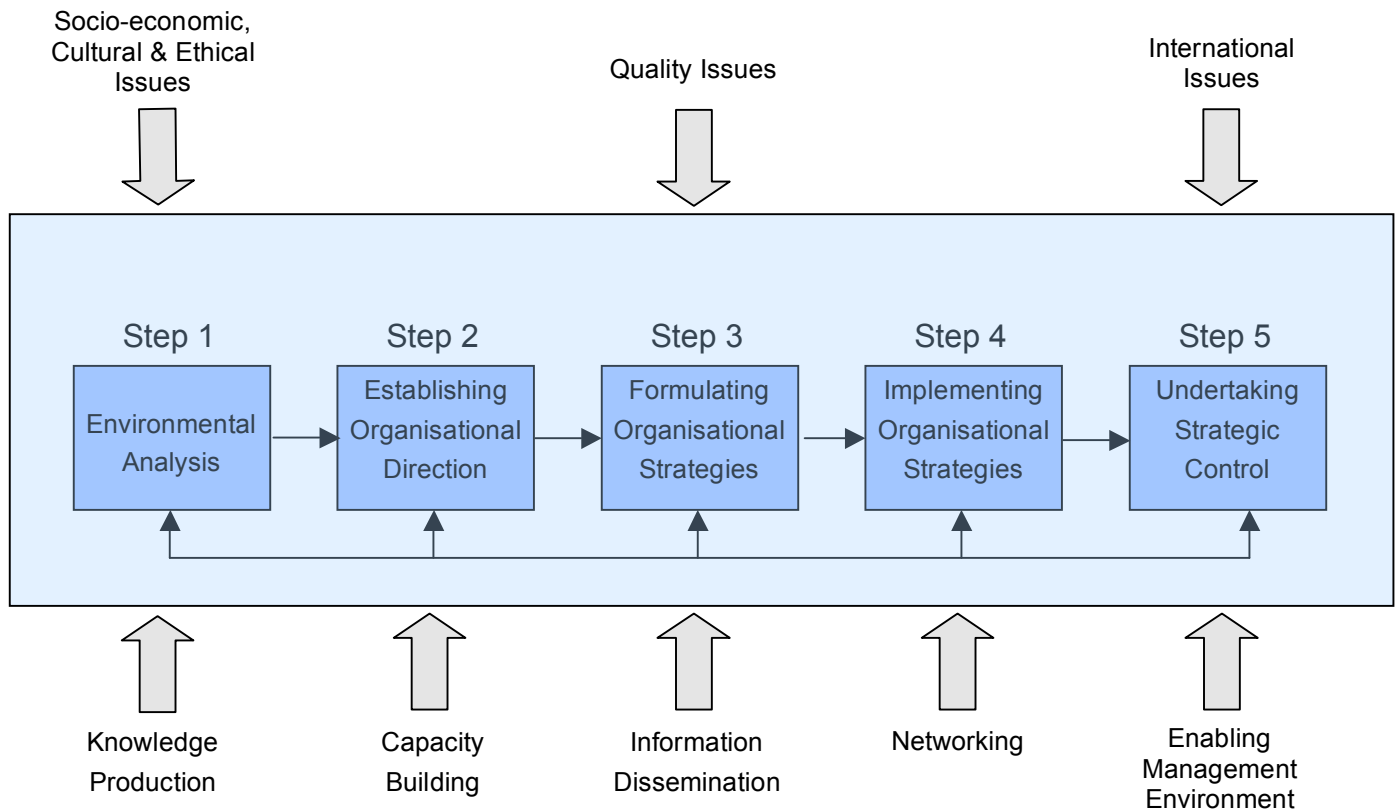
### Consultation Process, SAHARA



## Strategic Management Process for Implementing SAHARA's Work Program

SAHARA's work is underpinned by a strategic management process, which aims at keeping SAHARA appropriately matched to its broader environment, thereby increasing its organizational effectiveness and efficiency.

### SAHARA's Strategic Management Process



The process is iterative and continuously evolves as progress is made and lessons learnt. It is composed of five steps, which feed into each other:

- **Environmental Analysis** which monitors factors inside and outside SAHARA to identify present and future threats and opportunities that can influence its progress in establishing a sustainable competitive advantage.
- **Establishing a strategic organizational direction** for SAHARA, including its vision, mission, core functions, objectives, and priorities.

- **Formulating organizational strategies** (for Governance; Research; Capacity Development; Building & Maintaining Partnerships and Alliances; Information Dissemination; Gender; Resource Mobilization; etc.) to improve the chances of SAHARA's success.
- **Implementing the organizational strategies**, without which the benefits of the previous steps will not be attained.
- **Undertaking strategic control**, focusing on monitoring and evaluating the strategic management process to ensure that it functions properly.

Success in the above process will involve the application of SAHARA's critical functions individually and cross-functionally, including: financial operations, networking, information dissemination, capacity building, and knowledge production processes. It will also require careful consideration of quality issues, socio-economic, cultural and ethical issues, and international issues (in view of the fact that SAHARA operates internationally).