

Response to the CRIS Evaluation

UNAIDS/ESR/RMA

1. Background

Now in its third generation, The Country Response Information System version 3.0 (CRIS3) has evolved from CRIS' original design of supporting UNGASS reporting into a system that facilitates the collection, reporting and analysis of programme/projects' financial and indicator data. Incorporating lessons from previous CRIS versions and feedback received from countries and international partners, CRIS3 was designed to be a flexible, customizable and intuitive interface that allows the user to enter data and create reports. It aims to provide a country monitoring infra-structure that would serve the needs of the national AIDS authorities to track progress of their national response to HIV and AIDS and in reaching Universal Access.

To support the implementation of CRIS3 within countries, UNAIDS also provides technical assistance (TA) through the deployment of specially trained CRIS3 consultants. With the overall goal of *improving the rate of M&E reporting on HIV and AIDS in countries, and increasing the UNGASS reporting rate for 2010 reporting round*, the objective of technical assistance is to *strengthen the use of M&E data management and reporting tools* in countries. Although the consultants vary in expertise ranging from M&E to IT, they are all trained to execute the technical assistance modules outlined in the Technical Assistance Guide.

As part of the Second Independent Evaluation of UNAIDS and the management response to it, UNAIDS called for an independent evaluation of CRIS3. The purpose of the evaluation was to inform UNAIDS senior management in their decision making concerning the way forward for the CRIS initiative. This was to include guidance on the best way forward in (1) utilizing CRIS3 as a data management tool, (2) supporting the organizations who utilize CRIS as a monitoring tool, and (3) the role of UNAIDS monitoring and evaluation division in supporting data management tools, such as CRIS, as part of M&E systems for HIV and AIDS. This evaluation will be pertinent in the coming months as an aid to planning for the technical support required in 2011 as well as the strategic planning for 2012 and 2013.

The three objectives for this evaluation were:

- a. Assess the relevance, effectiveness and impact of CRIS at national and sub-national levels
- b. Assess the efficiency and capacity of CRIS implementation as provided by UNAIDS Geneva.
- c. Explore role of CRIS as part on national M&E system, and organizational strategy and sustainability for UNAIDS on its use in countries

This external and independent evaluation was conducted from July to September 2010 by EnCompass. The evaluation team was led by Tessie Catsambas (President) and Mary Gutmann (Senior Research Specialist). UNAIDS received the Evaluation Final report ("Evaluation of CRIS for UNAIDS") on September 30th and has found the methods, findings and conclusions comprehensive and credible.

2. Key Findings

- Having supported the three ones principles, CRIS catalyzes M&E thinking and strengthens national M&E systems by creating a common platform for monitoring and reporting
- CRIS training is not solely on IT skills building – it emphasizes on developing M&E systems, to which CRIS contributes as a data management tool
- Comparative advantages of CRIS: captures non clinical data, highly flexible, facilitates harmonization of indicators, free software
- 34 countries report using a version of CRIS; 14 countries report being in the planning or piloting phase of CRIS implementation. Most users of CRIS are low or low-middle income countries
- There is high demand for CRIS, but it is too early in implementation to see its impact in the national responses to HIV/AIDS

- Structural issues such as internet connectivity, hardware support, staff turnover rates and lack of M&E / IT capacity in the country offices hinder optimal CRIS uptake and implementation
- High satisfaction with CRIS TA and training provided – even more is requested to ensure its continuity
- Many countries are willing to pay for ongoing TA
- Concerns over the lack of resources in UNAIDS to sustain CRIS, however country confidence in CRIS is bolstered due to UNAIDS’ support
- A country focal point or champion is integral in the success of implementing any data management system such as CRIS
- Information regarding CRIS, its role and progress needs to be communicated better both within UNAIDS and to the general public

3. Recommendations and Response

“Support of CRIS is within the mandate of UNAIDS and its response to the three ones. There has been a high demand for CRIS, but conditions in country have made it difficult to implement. ...If CRIS is to be sustained as an option for monitoring the national and sub-national response, new arrangements need to be made to guarantee that necessary inputs and resources are available to sustain its use.” (Evaluation of CRIS for UNAIDS, p.46)

The following table summarizes the recommendations of the evaluation, and the response prepared by UNAIDS RMA team.

Recommendation ¹	RMA Response
1. Conduct country readiness assessments that will enable countries to prepare for the optimal use of TA resources	Agree. Criteria for country reception of TA will be further defined, with a focus on TA deliver to priority countries.
2. Prepare pricing packages for training and technical support that can be delivered by external contractors through brokerage methods	Agree. Funding of CRIS TA will originate from the country offices and/or RST. Pricing of all CRIS support will be outlined such that countries are aware for budgeting purposes.
3. Provide further M&E training and resources to enable country capacity alongside support to CRIS implementation	Agree. In cooperation with PEC team, RMA will package M&E capacity building material as requested by countries in support of data management implementation.
4. Seek funding for hardware compliant to CRIS requirements	Disagree. IT Infrastructure is not within RMA’s scope of support for CRIS.
5. Create a monitoring plan for CRIS implementation	Agree. A monitoring structure will be agreed on to track CRIS along with the all UNAIDS suite of tools for strategic information.

¹ These recommendations are summarized from the original evaluation. To see complete details of the evaluation recommendations, please see Annex 1 “Detailed RMA Response to the CRIS Evaluation”.

Recommendation ¹	RMA Response
6. Improve internal and external marketing / communication of CRIS	Agree. A communication strategy will be created in order to ensure users of the UNAIDS suite of tools are aware of all related information.
7. Create a transition plan for countries using CRIS	Partially Agree. CRIS, along with all UNAIDS suite of tools, will be packaged for country ownership and their sustainability.
8. Transfer the CRIS initiative to another partner	Disagree. As discovered through the evaluation, there is greater incentive in supporting CRIS through UNAIDS.

4. Way Forward

In line with the UNAIDS Outcome Framework and the ESR Strategy, and as part of the UNAIDS suite of tools for strategic information (SI), CRIS as an initiative and tool will be sustained by UNAIDS.

The strategy for CRIS will entail UNAIDS Geneva providing expertise and brokerage of TA provision, and UCOs or their national counterparts will drive the initiative; request, funding, and procurement of resources. It provides countries with greater control and ownership over CRIS while still garnering global support and expertise on the tool and its optimal implementation. See Annex 2 for the break down of roles and responsibilities.

The successful implementation of CRIS for the support of country monitoring systems will rely heavily on strong coordination and collaboration between UCOs, RSTs, and UNAIDS Geneva. Taking CRIS forward as a part of the suite of SI tools will provide countries an understanding of the options available to them for improved country monitoring. It will also elaborate the ways through which their data can be taken forward to produce strategic information that supports their national response, their national strategic plans, and progress towards Universal Access.

To facilitate transition into the new strategy, the following stratification of priority will be given to TA requests.

Priority	Group	Level of Support
1	Priority countries	The priority countries, as defined in the ESR strategy, may (upon fulfilling prerequisites) receive support from UNAIDS HQ. This support includes provision of training and/or TA via country visit from consultant and funding for such support. Logistical arrangements of TA (ie: workshop costs, printing, local transport) will be funded by the country and/or RST funds.
2	Past TA Recipients	To prevent negative impact to national systems, countries who have already received CRIS3 TA will receive partial support for TAs in 2011 (with remaining funds provided by UCO/NAC/RST budgets). This will enable them to sustain efforts and solidify implementation plans that were started in 2009 – 2010. Approval of these TAs will be subject to fulfilment of TA prerequisites, which includes a sustainability plan. Funding beyond 2011 will be provided by NAC/UCO/RST.
3	New Requests	New requests will be addressed according to the adopted recommendations below. Funding will come from UCO/RST budgets.

As it relates to the CRIS evaluation, the following chart outlines the recommendations to be adopted.

Recommendations to be adopted	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Conduct assessment on country data management needs and readiness that will enable countries to choose the optimal combination of tools (including CRIS) and prepare for the optimal use of TA resources 2. Prepare pricing packages for training and technical support that can be delivered by external contractors through brokerage methods 3. Provide further M&E training and resources to enable country capacity alongside support to CRIS implementation 5. Create a monitoring plan for CRIS implementation 6. Improve internal and external marketing / communication of CRIS 7. Create a transition plan for countries using CRIS 	
Investment from HQ	Advantage
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 Technical Officer • Software maintenance • Websites and forums maintenance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Current users have continued support for the sustainability of their initiative • Software integrity is retained as international IT infrastructures change (ie: compatibility to the evolution of operation systems and browsers) • Quality control over TA provision • Access to CRIS expertise and historical knowledge from HQ • Allows coordinated efforts and capacity building with other ongoing initiatives of similar nature, demonstrating UNAIDS continued technical leadership in this area. • Allow securing interoperability of systems, and facilitate strengthening local adjustments to use of tools.

As outlined in the “Detailed Response to the CRIS Evaluation” (see Annex 1), the agreed upon recommendations and respective action points will be incorporated into the RMA work plan and will be aligned with the upcoming UNAIDS Strategic Plan for 2011 – 2015, and the Evidence, Strategy and Results Department (ESR) Work plan. This strategy aims to further enhance country ownership of CRIS, strengthen the country’s capacity for data management systems and thus foster a culture for data collection, analysis and use. Additionally, clear opportunities to integrate with data management partners within countries will be pursued in order to map out how data tools can be used to understand and improve the programmatic response.

5. Additional Resources

Encompass, “Evaluation of CRIS for UNAIDS”, 2010.
 UNAIDS, “Request for Proposals – CRIS Evaluation”, 2010.

Annex 1: Detailed RMA Response to the CRIS Evaluation

CRIS Evaluation Recommendation #1

Consistently *assess country readiness* for CRIS in a way that is transparent and collaborative with each interested country. Specifically, take into account the technological capability and local computer hardware in use when deciding to support CRIS adoption. This would result in fewer countries being selected for CRIS, and greater attention given to them by UNAIDS. If a country is not ready, UNAIDS should *refer the country to a source of TA for building its M&E and IT capacity*.

RMA Response

Agree.

RMA will continue to support countries in readiness assessments in addition to further defining the prerequisites for the uptake and implementation of CRIS. In the case that a country wishes to implement a data management system but is lacking the prerequisites, RMA will explore methods of building their capacity in M&E and IT skills in partnership with the Programme Effectiveness and Country Support (PEC) Department and respective RST.

Action Point

- Continue to use the prerequisite list outlined in the TA Guide
- Package M&E sessions which directly relate to the support of data management systems

CRIS Evaluation Recommendation #2

Compete and award a prequalification/ indefinite quantity type contract for training and technical assistance that would identify *packages to be purchased by countries* for the configuration, deployment, and scale of CRIS use at all levels and possibly areas other than HIV and AIDS. These packages would be *based on the excellent curriculum that UNAIDS has already developed* for the initial CRIS training, and the existing types of CRIS TA terms of reference that UNAIDS facilitates for countries. Specific services would include:

- Initial/configuration training
- Refresher/expansion training
- Configuration TA
- Troubleshooting TA

Two to three *organizations should become prequalified to provide these services*, and UNAIDS would help to define the scope, and keep the price low for the services.

RMA Response

Agree.

Due to funding constraints, RMA will no longer be able to provide TA as freely as has been done in the past. The responsibility of funding for data management systems and their corresponding TA will be transferred to the country offices and the RSTs. In addition to

ensuring that a cadre of consultants is available to provide quality TA for CRIS, RMA will broker the TA provision by creating pricing packages of the TA components such that they can be easily picked up and implemented by countries. Priority countries² will be provided with data management support based on need and as it relates to their NSP.

Action Point

- Package the pricing of TA components that are outlined in the TA Guide
- Continue to train and update CRIS consultants for deployment of country TAs
- Request UCOs and RSTs to budget for support of data management systems
- Continue to work with TSFs to facilitate funding / coordination of TAs
- Provide continuous support for trouble shooting (online) and software maintenance issues

CRIS Evaluation Recommendation #3

Broker the availability of resident M&E capacity building alongside CRIS implementation. This responsibility could be held by a range of actors: UNAIDS M&E Advisors, USAID, Global Fund, etc. UNAIDS should facilitate funder coordination for this type of support.

RMA Response

Agree.

The adoption of electronic data management tools has brought about higher demand in M&E capacity building in order to further utilize the tools and their potential in producing strategic information. In addition to the MERG normative guidance, UNAIDS can provide guidance on the technical experts that can support the required M&E information and training.

Action Point

- Identify M&E sources / training within the regions that can be utilized to provide the requested IT and M&E support.

CRIS Evaluation Recommendation #4

Seek funding for computers that meet the software requirements of CRIS, and Internet tools such as broadband connections, e.g. from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

RMA Response

Disagree

IT Infrastructure is not within RMA's scope of support for CRIS. Should support for hardware and connectivity within countries be required, it should come from UCOs or similar stakeholder resources.

Action Point

None

² These are priority countries as defined by the ESR Strategy.

CRIS Evaluation Recommendation #5

An M&E strategy should be developed to *monitor implementation of CRIS* in the regions including TA, training, and other support. The strategy should monitor progress against targeted outcomes and impact related to M&E capacity, use of data for decisions, and reporting.

RMA Response

Agree.

A monitoring plan will be created in order to track the progress of CRIS as well as all tools within UNAIDS suite of tools for strategic information. This will provide continuous information on the relevance, effectiveness and impact of the tools for their users and their work on the ground.

Action Point

- Create monitoring plan to track and assess the implementation of data management systems

CRIS Evaluation Recommendation #6

Improve the communication on the progress and contributions of CRIS at country level. In the absence of the old M&E Newsletter, the CRIS team could send out periodic short updates (one-pagers) on the progress, challenges, and achievements of CRIS. Also, the website should include a clear delineation of the uses and benefits of CRIS, DevInfo, and Global Fund Dashboard in order to clarify false impressions about perceived overlap of these systems, and encourage collaboration.

RMA Response

Agree.

RMA is aware that greater clarity on CRIS and all UNAIDS tools for strategic information is desired. A strategy to communicate CRIS (and the suite of tools offered by UNAIDS), its functions and applicability will be created and shared through the existing forum available (ie: AIDSSpace, Global HIV M&E Info Portal, etc.). Greater efforts will be taken in providing updates on activities and support related to the tools.

RMA will also explore options for interoperability with other commonly tools in country level data management, such as DevInfo and Global Fund's dashboard.

Action Point

- Create communication strategy on suite of tools for strategic information, of which CRIS is a component
- Liaise with other data management stakeholders on opportunities and methods for interoperability

CRIS Evaluation Recommendation #7

Establish a transition plan for countries that are using CRIS.

RMA Response

Partially Agree.

CRIS has been developed with country ownership of the tool in mind since the sustainability and independence of the tool is vital to its

successful adoption within countries. Therefore RMA will continue to encourage counties to customize their instances of CRIS according to their needs. RMA will support countries in identifying and building their capacity on the ground to implement and maintain their own systems. This can be done through resources within the county offices or through the cadre of available consultants with the use of the TA / training packages.

Action Point

- Make all customizable information and resources readily available in the online forums.
- Package TA content, pricing and complementary M&E support for countries to select from based on their need.

CRIS Evaluation Recommendation #8

Facilitate having *another donor take over CRIS*

RMA Response

Disagree.

As stated in the evaluation, “Having UNAIDS behind the CRIS system has given countries a level of confidence in the motivation of UNAIDS not to make them “dependent,” but to benefit HIV and AIDS program effectiveness” (p.43). Therefore, CRIS will remain a product supported by UNAIDS through the RMA Team.

Action Point

None.

Annex 2: Way Forward

The following table outlines the roles and responsibilities of the main stakeholders involved in the reception of a CRIS TA.

Responsible	Role	Responsibilities	Investment
RMA /UNAIDS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support to Country Offices in preparation for CRIS TA 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Forum for users Brokerage of packages with TA providers (costing, agreements with TSFs/consultants) Direct support to ESR priority countries Screening, preparing and approving country reception of TA Coordinate the consultants and the TA requests Monitor CRIS progress (along with the suite of SI tools) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Technical Officer Software maintenance Websites and forums maintenance
RST	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support country office in TA acquirement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> If needed, provide funds through TSF (in regions where applicable) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> If needed, funds for country office to receive TA
NAC/UCO	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lead and host TA initiative and its sustainability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Meet the requirements for a TA Gather and share relevant documents to support the TA work Participate in TA activities Funding and logistics of TA Complete TA feedback survey (for HQ) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Funding of consultant and logistics of TA IT infrastructure to maintain and sustain CRIS CRIS focal point
Consultant	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provision of TA as requested by country office 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide TA according to ToR Produces final report to be shared with HQ, UCO, NAC, RST (and TSF iff needed) 	