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Stories from the field: Community engagement in the C19RM Response Mechanism

In April 2020, the Global Fund launched its [COVID-19 Response Mechanism](#) (C19RM) grant facility to help countries address COVID-19 and mitigate its impact on HIV, TB, malaria, and health systems programs. Thanks to significant additional contributions from Global Fund donors, in March 2021 the Global Fund Board approved an extension of C19RM and associated operational flexibilities for existing grants. In April 2021, the Global Fund launched the second phase, C19RM 2.0. All Global Fund grant countries were eligible to receive C19RM funding.

The figure below presents an overview of the latest global C19RM funding situation as of 13 January 2022.

In January 2022, a virtual Global Civil Society and Community Engagement Roundtable was hosted by the six Community, Rights and Gender (CRG) Regional Platforms under the [CRG Strategic Initiative](#) (SI). Kate Thomson, Head of the Global Fund's CRG Department, introduced the webinar [Rain or Shine II: Community Engagement in the Global Fund's COVID-19 Response Mechanism in 2021](#). She noted that 2021 had been an intense year at the Global Fund, to say the least. In addition to investing \$4 billion to address HIV, TB and malaria, the Fund had also allocated \$3.2 billion through C19RM. Kate acknowledged that it had also been a whirlwind year for many partners at the country level.

The CRG Department had listened to its stakeholders through the Regional Platforms and 2020 feedback that C19RM was challenging to navigate, especially for communities. So, in 2021, the CRG Department secured additional funding, specially earmarked to support meaningful community engagement in C19RM. The existing architecture of the CRG SI was leveraged to support this effort.

I'm incredibly proud of our Strategic Initiative partners, who really rose to the occasion. This includes the team at the Global Fund Secretariat, our technical assistance providers, the key and vulnerable population networks, and the CRG Regional Platforms hosting today's event.

Our partners mobilized communities around the world in a truly unprecedented way, helping us target our C19RM investments to where the need is greatest.

In the space of just three short months, and with limited resources, our partners delivered 38 technical assistance assignments to help communities do rapid needs assessments and set priorities for C19RM. They also directed local organizations to convene community consultations in 64 countries.

I can't think of a better theme for this session than "Rain or Shine". That's how our partners and the communities they serve showed up to engage in C19RM – no matter what, and against all obstacles. Kate Thomson, CRG Department Head

This article discusses the work of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and Francophone Africa Regional Platforms, and the lessons and recommendations that have resulted.

Community engagement and C19RM: the MENA region

There was significant engagement of civil society, in all its diversity, in the consultations to develop national C19RM proposals. Civil society was able to provide valuable input, particularly for key populations (KPs) and hard-to-reach groups, while ensuring that all relevant partners were engaged and played a key role in the design, implementation and reporting stages. The proposals included contributions from all civil society and communities, including non-government organizations (NGOs), networks of people living with HIV (PLHIV), those most severely affected by COVID-19, and KPs, in particular: men who have sex with men (MSM), transgender (TG) people, including TG women, sex workers (SWs), people who inject drugs (PWID), and people deprived of their liberty, including those in prison settings.

Support from the Global Fund's CRG Regional Platform in the MENA region

During the pandemic, communities have been needed more than ever to deliver key programs affected by COVID-19 and were ideally positioned to alert, advise and provide services.

Between May and July 2021, as part of the preparation of C19RM grant applications, the MENA Regional Platform conducted various community-level consultations in six countries: Egypt, Mauritania, Morocco, Somalia, Sudan, and Tunisia. The different organizations in these countries organized workshops, focus groups and virtual meetings with several community organizations. It was as a result of these consultations that civil society organizations (CSOs) requested technical assistance from the CRG Department.

What worked well and why?

Communities made the most of their engagement in the process and were fully involved. They felt that the process was transparent thanks in part to information being fully accessible because documents were rapidly adapted for use (summarized, translated, etc.). The unprecedented level of community involvement at the regional level was due to many factors: (i) the extensive national and regional partner networks, (ii) support from the CRG team, (iii) weekly meetings, (iv) the exceptional readiness of Country Coordinating Mechanisms (CCMs) to support the process and collaborate with the Regional Platform, and (v) the availability of financial resources to support countries through the CRG SI.

Some constraints were also noted

First, KPs were not represented in all the dialogues, partly due to the absence of community organization representatives, but also because of time constraints.

Second, their presence did not always result in their effective participation in the discussions, as many KP representatives were unable to express themselves and properly represent their members.

Finally, everyone commented on the challenges arising from the very short time frame allocated to the preparation of such a large grant application. These conditions did not always allow for the mobilization of representatives from all affected communities or for the successful completion of the proposal. In the case of Egypt, the preparation period for the C19RM application coincided with the development of the country's HIV/TB grant, which hampered the affected groups' involvement in C19RM discussions.

How to overcome these problems

Samia Mahmoudi, Deputy Coordinator of the MENA Regional Platform, noted that in future measures to overcome the aforementioned challenges should include:

- Early communication about upcoming grants to stakeholders to ensure favorable conditions for preparing future grant applications under this mechanism.
- Adapt application deadlines to the resources and constraints of country actors.
- Conduct an in-depth analysis of how the results of the community dialogues are considered in the final process of awarding community grants, as well as in the decision-making process regarding budget allocations.

Community engagement and C19RM: Francophone African countries

Support from the Global Fund's CRG Regional Platform

The Francophone Africa Regional Platform has provided significant support to the C19RM funding application process in this region:

- Recruitment of a C19RM focal point. The main objective of the C19RM Focal Point's work is to increase the participation of civil society actors and to strengthen their skills, particularly in the preparation of C19RM 2021 funding applications for C19RM grants that take into account both community engagement, and human rights and gender.
- The development of tools such as a simplified modular framework, a list of KPs affected by COVID, and dissemination of C19RM information.
- Several documents were translated into French, including [Integrating Community Monitoring \(CM\)](#) into C19RM funding applications, the C19RM 2.0 toolkit and [Meaningful Involvement in C19RM](#).
- The C19RM FP supported civil society and communities in developing their technical assistance (TA) requests through community consultations, workshops, and focus groups.
- In addition, the FP analyzed the relevance and eligibility of the needs of CSOs from ten countries (Benin, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Gabon, Guinea, Madagascar, Sao Tome and Senegal).
- The CRG Regional Platform also awarded direct grants to seven countries to enable their participation in the C19RM process (Benin, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, DRC and Madagascar).

What worked well and why?

Having a C19RM Focal Point made all the difference. The FP helped in several ways:

- Identification of technical assistance needs: Nine countries received TA from the CRG, notably in the development of two tools such as a [simplified modular framework](#) and a [list of KPs](#) affected by COVID-19 as well as the revision of the community sub-sections of the country's funding request and the provision of comments and suggestions.
- Reviewed the community sub-sections of the countries' funding applications and provided comments and suggestions in the case of Burundi and Senegal.
- Helped to develop sub-grants for C19RM engagement to support CSOs in seven countries, including the organization of civil society and community consultations, focus groups (in Côte d'Ivoire and DRC), workshops, and so on.
- Production, translation and dissemination of information: approximately 3,800 people were reached through five webinars, 13 newsletters, and several WhatsApp groups.

The challenges

Funds were not sufficient to allow for subgrants to be made to all countries needing support for community engagement. Due to restrictions imposed by the pandemic such as lockdowns, there was a limited number of participants in the civil society consultations and writing workshops.

Recommendations

The roundtable's participants made two recommendations for new grant development processes:

1. Increase the resources available to communities at the national level to support their ability to convene and contribute to priority setting for C19RM.
2. Build the capacity of civil society and communities to be more effective in online sessions for Global Fund processes.

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