



Independent observer
of the Global Fund

Six Challenges Faced by Round 4 Applicants

Potential applicants to the Global Fund for Round 4 grants face six significant challenges that could have been prevented. First, the application form is too long and complex. Second, a few of its instructions and questions are ambiguous. Third, the new online application form is unusable for many applicants. Fourth, insufficient technical assistance, particularly by WHO, has been made available to applicants. Fifth, the potential role of the private sector has not been clearly explained. And sixth, little guidance has been provided on how countries can “bundle” multiple “mini-applications” into one consolidated application.

Some of the challenges discussed below could have been avoided if the Secretariat had handled things differently. But within certain areas, the challenges are the result of decisions – or non-decisions – by the Board.

Challenge 1: Application form too long and complex

The Round 4 Proposal Form is 36 pages long, plus informational appendices. It's true that no single applicant has to complete all parts of the form, and that the Round 3 form was of a comparable length. But still, both the length and the complexity are daunting. It is considerably harder to fill in the form than it would be to complete a fairly sophisticated tax return, even in cases where the data is available, which often it will not be. As in the past, parts of the form give the impression that it was designed by a committee of technocrats, each of whom was more anxious to ensure that the questions closest to his or her heart were included than that life for the applicant was made bearable.

Recommendation: For Round 5 and later, external experts should be found who can propose a simpler form. Plenty of time should be made available for this, because there will no doubt be a need for exchanges of views between the experts, the Secretariat, and the relevant board committee.

Challenge 2: Application form questions sometimes ambiguous

A few of the questions and requirements in the application form are ambiguous. One example: it's not clear what are the consequences if not all CCM members sign the proposal. The Guidelines for Proposals says "Proposals should be endorsed [i.e. signed] by the full CCM membership;" but the Form itself says "CCM members who have not been involved should not sign the proposal." Another example: In cases where a National CCM has agreed in writing to the formation of a Sub-National CCM, it's not clear whether the National CCM also has to agree in writing with the content of the actual proposal submitted by that Sub-National CCM. Third example: it's not clear what question 4.3.14.3 means ("Indicate the major barriers to scaling up the interventions that have been identified as proven and effective have not previously been scaled up.")

The Fund's web site says that queries about the application process should be sent to proposals@theglobalfund.org, though this is not mentioned in the Form or Guidelines. The Secretariat has informed GFO that it has received and responded to over 120 queries.

Recommendation A: The Secretariat should provide, via both web and email, a regularly-updated document that contains any new information contained in answers it has sent to queries from individual applicants, in order to ensure that all applicants are treated equitably.

Recommendation B: In future rounds, all CCM members should be required to sign the proposal, but each person signing should indicate either that they endorse the proposal, or that they do not, with reasons why not. (This would enable the Fund to distinguish between major and minor reasons for not endorsing the proposal.)

Challenge 3: Online application form unusable for many applicants

Thus far, the Secretariat has only provided two methods whereby applicants can fill in the Round 4 proposal form. One of these is to download a read-only PDF form; the other is to complete the application online.

(The Guidelines for Proposals published by the Fund on 10 January 2004 says "Proposal forms can also be downloaded from the Global Fund website and submitted electronically." From the time that that statement was made until when this issue of GFO went to press seven weeks later, that statement has been incorrect.)

The PDF form is useless when it becomes time to complete the application, because it is not editable. Its only value is as something that can be printed out so that applicants can read all of the application form.

And the only situation in which the online application form is of value is when the person filling in the form has a very fast "broadband" Internet connection. But a significant proportion of the applicants do not have access to such a connection.

GFO tested how long it takes to go from the logon screen to the first screen of the online application form when using a non-broadband telephone dial-up link during off-peak weekend times in Johannesburg, South Africa (which has excellent phone services). In those tests that succeeded, the average time taken between clicking "Enter" on the logon screen and seeing the screen that follows was seven minutes (not seconds). In other tests, the attempt failed with a timeout message. Times taken to go from one screen to another within the application form were comparable. Things will certainly be worse on weekdays and in cities with less good phone service than Johannesburg.

This means that the online application form is unusable for a significant percentage of applicants.

The Secretariat informed GFO weeks ago that it was preparing another option, which is a CD-ROM containing the complete application form that applicants can install on their computers. This is certainly a far better option than the two discussed above. But nothing was stated about this option at the Fund's web site. And the CD-ROM has only just been completed, seven weeks after the launch of Round 4. It is apparently being sent to local WHO and UNAIDS offices, and is available upon request to proposals@theglobalfund.org, as GFO goes to press.

Another problem is that neither of the two options now available, nor (it is believed) the new CD-ROM option, permits team-writing, in which one writer completes one part of the application and other writers simultaneously complete other parts. Yet team-writing is conducted by the majority of applicants, and is reflective of the whole partnership approach that the Fund advocates.

Recommendation: The Secretariat should urgently write to all CCMs and all known other applicants providing a very simple fourth option – namely, the application form as a conventional editable Word file. This was the only option provided in Round 3, but it is not currently available in Round 4. It permits several copies of the file to be made by a proposal-writing team. Each writer can type into the Word file, on a standalone PC, his or her answers to different questions. Then one editor can take all the files that the different writers have worked on, and create, through cut-and-paste, a single Word file containing Question 1 as answered by Writer A, Question 2 as answered by Writer B, etc. Certainly, this approach provides plenty of potential for mistakes to be made, and the formatting often needs some fixing. But it worked in Round 3. And many proposal-writing teams will far prefer it to the options currently provided by the Secretariat.

[Note: GFO sent a draft of this article to the Secretariat for comment. The Secretariat responded that an editable Word version of the application form, as recommended above, is now available. It can be obtained upon request to proposals@theglobalfund.org. Hopefully it will soon be available for download from the Fund's web site.]

Challenge 4: Insufficient technical assistance available for applicants

Applicants to the Global Fund have always had difficulties finding appropriate technical assistance (TA). (Note: In January, Aidspace, publisher of GFO, released the "Aidspace Guide to Obtaining Global Fund-Related Technical Assistance" – see www.aidspace.org/guides – with half a page of information on each of 160 providers of TA.)

But TA is of particular importance in Round 4, given the WHO's "3 by 5" goal of having 3 million people on treatment with antiretroviral drugs by the end of 2005. The Global Fund is the single most important means whereby funding can be made available for providing such treatment.

WHO had originally planned to provide many additional experts who could travel to or be based in applicant countries and provide TA to help in the preparation of treatment-related proposals for Round 4. But WHO has had considerable difficulties raising the additional funds it needs internally to provide this TA.

Recommendation: Donors should urgently find ways of providing additional support to WHO to make it easier, in turn, for WHO to provide this TA.

Challenge 5: Confusion regarding role of private sector in applications to the Global Fund

When the Secretariat launched Round 4 on 10 January 2004, it included a misleading statement about the private sector in its press release. It suggested that private sector companies can apply direct to the

Global Fund for grants.

The Fund meant instead to encourage private sector companies to help, as members of CCMs or as allies of CCMs, in preparing “co-investment” proposals from the CCM to the Fund. These would be proposals in which the private sector, the Global Fund, and sometimes the government or NGOs will jointly fund the cost of programs designed to benefit communities in which the companies are based.

Some companies have already made commitments to provide ARV treatment to their employees. But these companies are caught in a bind. They know that to treat their employees but not the employees’ family members and other members of the community in which the companies are based is both ethically and practically dubious. Yet to treat all of them is financially prohibitive.

The co-investment concept involves achieving cooperation between three parties. One or more companies operating within an affected community provide their physical infrastructure, their trained staff, their expertise with certain forms of management, and their money. The Global Fund provides additional money. And the government and/or relevant NGOs provide additional facilities such as clinics and/or staff. A program is then designed, and described in a Round 4 proposal from the CCM to the Fund, whereby employees, family members and community members can all benefit from services provided and financed collectively by these three parties.

Recommendation: The Secretariat should urgently communicate to known and potential applicants a clear description of how co-investment could be implemented in a Global Fund grant.

Challenge 6: Uncertainty how to bundle mini-applications

In some countries, the CCM commissions a technical working group to design and write an entire proposal to the Fund. Such teams (or the people they report to) are frequently dominated by government and bilateral/multilateral members, with zero or minimal involvement by NGOs. In some other countries, however, an interesting experiment is being conducted in which the CCM advertises for organizations of various kinds to submit their “mini-proposals” to the CCM. The CCM rejects some, accepts others, and then attempts to bundle the accepted ones into one or more consolidated applications that it then submits to the Fund. (See, for instance, the items regarding Kenya and South Africa elsewhere in this issue.)

The problems with this approach are as follows. First, organizations submitting the mini-applications to the CCM are given very little time and very little support, and are usually expected to use part or all of the enormously complex Global Fund application form. Second, insufficient time is available for the CCM to choose which mini-applications to support and to consolidate. Third, occasionally a CCM “hijacks” the ideas or even the text in some of the mini-proposals, and makes use of them in a way that will not benefit the applicants. Finally, there is a real danger that consolidated applications sent to the Fund in this way will then get rejected because they are composed of multiple elements that are not really compatible, even if the individual components were good.

Recommendation: The Secretariat should release as soon as possible some guidelines regarding Round 5, even if the timing of Round 5 is not yet known. First, it should provide a simple mini-application form that it suggests (but does not require) that CCMs use when they invite organizations to submit mini-applications to the CCM, and it should provide suggested guidelines for the use by applicants of these mini-application forms. Second, it should provide suggestions (but not requirements) as to how the CCM could set criteria for acceptance/rejection of these mini-applications, and for how the CCM could then bundle accepted mini-applications into one Round 5 application. Third, when the Fund later designs the Round 5 application form, it should ensure that that form is consistent with (but inevitably more complex and complete than) the mini-application forms already sent out.

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