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of the Global Fund

The Executive Director Selection: It's Time to Improve the Rules

There's no question that the Global Fund's failure to agree on a new Executive Director is a cause of public embarrassment. But this outcome is in fact the result of one of the Fund's greatest strengths.

Five years ago, the Fund set itself a very high bar: every time the board makes an important decision, it must obtain a "double two-thirds majority", with seven out of the ten "donor members" and seven out of the ten "recipient members" voting in support of the resolution.

What is amazing is not that the board failed to leap this bar when choosing an Executive Director last week; it is that this was only the second time in five years that such a thing has happened. (The previous time was in 2004, when the board failed to approve a resolution that the Fund should accept certain forms of "in-kind" donations.)

If the board had a less onerous rule – perhaps one in which a decision could be forced through by a majority of one group working with a minority of the other group – the Fund would now have a new Executive Director. But such an Executive Director would not have received as strong a mandate as he or she would be likely to want.

So: the tough rule worked. It rightly forced the board to attempt to find a new candidate who can generate consensus.

Having said that, the Fund cannot afford to have a second failure; this would suggest to many that the Fund is incapable of running itself effectively. Improvements must be made to the rules. Here are some suggestions.

1. First and foremost, board members must agree to reduce the level of politicking on behalf of one or

another candidate. The Fund's bylaws state that the Executive Director must be selected "based on merit, in a non-political, open and competitive manner." That is perhaps a bit naïve – choosing the leader of an international organization is nearly always based on a mix of merit and politics. But in this case the politics got out of hand. During the lead-up to the board meeting, government leaders actively promoted specific candidates. At the meeting itself, some European donors dropped very broad hints that their willingness to provide continued or increased financial support to the Fund depended on whether their preferred candidate was chosen. (This at times had the opposite of the desired effect, causing resentment and increased rigidity, including among other European donors.) And some board members refused to vote for a candidate whom, in other contexts, they had happily worked with and apparently respected, creating the clear impression that their stand was based in part on instructions from their capitals based, in turn, on geo-political rather than merit factors. As a result, the mood got quite tense at times, not just between the voting groups, but within them.

2. The board needs to develop a more realistic position on what information truly needs to be confidential. Even though all five candidates were perfectly willing to have their identities and views publicly known, the Fund refused to release any of this information. If the selection is to be carried out primarily by a board committee based on candidate merit, it's fine to keep the details private. But if it is to be done by the full board partly on a political basis, the main details about the candidates should be made completely public so that CCM members and the like can make their views known to their board members.
3. Time should not be wasted by advertising widely for additional candidates. Instead, the Nomination Committee (NC) should, through its chair, actively seek to persuade some world-class figures to apply. Through informal discussions by phone or email, committee members should agree on half a dozen people whom they regard as eminently qualified, and then decide on the best way to approach those persons and convince them to let their names be put forward.
4. The NC should consider urging the board to drop its requirement that the NC supply it with five names, and instead propose that it put forward just one. If it has to submit more than one name to the board, some high-profile candidates will be very unwilling to expose themselves to the possibility of public rejection such as happened to all five members of the first shortlist. This is the ultimate test of "merit" versus "politics". If the board is serious that the selection should be based just on merit, and wants to avoid the risk of another bruising fight, it should trust the NC to thoroughly evaluate the candidates, and then just vote yes or no on the NC's first choice without being told who else the NC had considered.
5. Board members and alternates should meet in person with the candidate(s) sent to them by the NC.
6. The board should agree before beginning the process that if no candidate is supported by seven out of ten donors and seven out of ten recipients, some specified fallback rules will be used (e.g. five out of ten donors and five out of ten recipients, or fourteen out of twenty donors-plus-recipients).

It is already eight months since Richard Feachem announced that he will be leaving, and the Fund urgently needs a new Executive Director. The Fund expects its grantees to perform heroically to implement their grants. The board must now do the same.

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