



Independent observer
of the Global Fund

Global Fund Principal Recipient Survey

An Assessment of Opinions and Experiences of Principal Recipients

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List of abbreviations

ACT	Artemisinin-based combination therapy
GFO	Global Fund Observer
CCM	Country coordinating mechanism
FBO	Faith-based organisation
FPM	Fund portfolio manager
LFA	Local fund agent
PR	Principal recipient
MO	Multilateral organisation
MoH	Ministry of Health
MoF	Ministry of Finance
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
OIG	Office of the Inspector General
PQR	Price and quality reporting system
SR	Sub-recipient
SSA	Sub-Saharan Africa
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
VPP	Voluntary pooled procurement

Preface

Aidspan (www.aidspan.org) is an international NGO based in Nairobi, Kenya, whose mission is to reinforce the effectiveness of the Global Fund. Aidspan performs this mission by serving as an independent watchdog of the Fund, and by providing services that can benefit all countries wishing to obtain and make effective use of Global Fund financing.

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Executive Summary

Principal recipients (PRs) are country level organisations directly responsible for receiving Global Fund money and implementing programs, or recruiting other organisations to implement them. Their role is central: translating the money of the Global Fund into results. However, little research has been done to understand their operations and experiences, or to get their opinions on how Global Fund operations can be improved.

Therefore, Aidspan undertook a survey of government and non-government PRs across all regions covered by the Global Fund. An internet-based questionnaire was developed and administered to 315 PRs, of which 115 responded.

The majority of PRs were of the opinion that the grant system was complex, with only 36% saying they thought the grant negotiation processes were straightforward. Two thirds thought the system for rating grant performance did not accurately reflect performance. However, 75% of PRs agreed that the progress update and disbursement request system that the Global Fund uses is a useful method of reporting grant progress.

Opinions on the effectiveness of communication and relationships with other actors varied. Nearly all PRs thought their organisations enjoyed adequate communication with sub-recipients (92%) and fund portfolio managers (86%); a lower proportion thought they communicated adequately with country coordinating mechanisms (73%).

Nearly two-thirds of respondents said they were happy with the work of the Office of the Inspector General (OIG). However, only a half of non-government PRs thought the OIG was professional in its work.

Less than a third of PRs thought their organisation needed assistance in financial management on areas related to programme implementation. When asked about the voluntary pooled procurement system, over half of the PRs thought it made procurement cheaper and easier. But only 29% thought the system should be made compulsory.

When asked which aspects of the Global Fund operations needed improvement, most PRs said that the Fund should re-define and clarify the roles of different actors, minimise FPM staff turnover, and shorten the grant negotiation and signing processes. All of these are currently being addressed, either directly or indirectly, under a new funding model. Vigorous assessments should nonetheless follow the roll-out of the new model to ensure the areas that most affect PR performance realise sustained improvement.

1. Introduction

Principal recipients (PRs) are a central feature of the Global Fund's in-country architecture. Their role is to implement the Fund's programmes or recruit and manage other organisations to do so [1]. PRs are nominated by country coordinating mechanisms (CCMs) and approved by the Global Fund. An independent assessment is done by the local fund agent (LFA), the Global Fund's representative at country level [2], before the approval is given. The PRs may be government ministries and departments, private commercial entities, national and international non-governmental organisations, or multilateral bodies such as the United Nations (UN).

The ability of PRs to effectively implement programmes depends on various factors. These include organisational and managerial capacity, communication and support from other Global Fund actors, and the ability to effectively recruit and manage sub-recipients (SRs).

While organisations are required to demonstrate minimum programmatic and financial management capacity before being selected as PRs [1, 2], factors such as staff turnover and the ever-changing Global Fund requirements affect their effectiveness. Similarly, poor communication with the Fund, CCMs, LFAs and SRs may lead to poor performance. Other factors such as government bureaucracy and civil unrest may also reduce their effectiveness.

There have been questions over how well informed the Global Fund is on the operations of PRs, and whether PRs get sufficient assistance from the Fund. Does the Fund know what constitutes an effective in-country environment for sound implementation [3], and whether there is sufficient attention and support to these implementers[4]? Partly in response to these concerns, the Fund recently made adjustments to its governance structure, allocating more staff and resources towards grant management [5]. However, there is limited information on PR attitudes and experiences, and opinions on what could improve their functions.

What has been documented about PR experiences has come from country-specific case studies [6–8]. Little is known about how opinions and experiences vary across the broader group of PRs in all Global Fund-supported regions. The nearest we have to a global snapshot of PR experiences are findings from the annual portfolio surveys conducted by the Fund [9]. However, these assess PR progress towards targets and how countries manage donors, rather than describing the experiences or opinions of the PRs. Also, there are concerns that these surveys cannot provide unbiased information on PRs because they are conducted by the Global Fund. Finally, findings from these surveys are neither published nor shared publicly, thus limiting their role in the broader global health domain.

It is against this background that the Aidspace PR survey was conceived. This survey was designed to collect opinions and describe experiences of Global Fund PRs on aspects of the Fund's management and operational systems. Besides guiding policy on areas that are most in need of improvement, we hope the survey will provide baseline information against which grant management improvements can be assessed.

2. Methodology

The study was conducted using a cross-sectional survey with a self-administered, internet-based questionnaire.

A list of all PRs was obtained from the Global Fund website. Based on information retrieved in September 2012, there were 325 PRs operating in 139 countries from eight Global Fund regions: East Asia and Pacific, Eastern Africa and Indian Ocean, Eastern Europe and Central Asia, Latin America and Caribbean, Middle East and North Africa, South and West Asia, Southern Africa, and West and Central Africa.

The Global Fund classifies PRs into 10 categories (*information from the Global Fund's raw spreadsheets, check [here](#)*). These categories are presented in Box 1 below.

Box 1: Global Fund classification of principal recipients

❖ Government-ministry of finance	❖ Multilateral organisation-other
❖ Government-ministry of health	❖ Third party organisation
❖ Government-other ministry	❖ Private-commercial enterprise
❖ Private non-governmental organisation	❖ Private other
❖ Private-faith based organisation	❖ Multilateral organisation-UNDP

This is the primary classification used by the Fund. Using this typology, however, would have created categories that were too small for meaningful analysis. So, PRs were classified as governmental or non-governmental (in bold in Table 1). The latter included private-for-profit and private-not-for-profit organisations, as well as multilateral organisations like the UN.

We also classified PRs into two broad geographic regions for analysis; PRs from Sub-Saharan African (SSA) and PRs from all the other regions combined (Table 2). We considered SSA a special category for two reasons: i) it has the highest burden of the three diseases [10], meaning PRs most likely face a unique set of challenges; and ii) SSA receives the largest share of money from the Global Fund [11], meaning the Fund would be keen to understand and improve PR experiences in this region in order to ensure the best possible use of resources.

Table 1: The PR classification used for the survey

PR type	Number of PRs (%)
Classification by PR type	
Government PRs	164 (51%)
Ministry of finance (MoF)	8
Ministry of health (MoH)	116
Other government agency/ministry	40
Non-government PRs	161 (49%)
Non-governmental organisations (NGOs)	118
Faith-based organisations (FBOs)	7
Private-for-profit sector	16
Multilateral organisations (MOs)	13
Non-government (other)	7
Classification by geographic region	
Sub-Saharan Africa	128 (39%)
East Africa	38
Southern Africa	28
West and Central Africa	62
All other regions	197 (62%)
East Asia and the Pacific	43
Eastern Europe and Central Asia	44
Latin America and the Caribbean	50
North Africa and the Middle East	26
South Asia	34

Survey data collection

A short questionnaire was developed based on a literature review and knowledge within Aidspan's staff about PRs and the Global Fund. The instrument covered information on the nature, size and operations of the organisation; experiences in grant implementation; relationships with other actors; and opinions on various Global Fund systems and processes. The tool also included two open ended questions: one seeking opinions on reasons for grant delays, and the other asking PRs what can be done to make the Global Fund more effective (*see the appendix for the PR survey questionnaire*).

The instrument was translated into French and Spanish, back-translated, and piloted for logic, flow and content. Minor adjustments were made after the pilot and a final internet-version developed by the Survey Monkey group (Survey Monkey®).

Email surveys have certain advantages over postal surveys, including lower costs and faster response. However, they have lower response rates compared to questionnaires administered through face-to-face interviewing. A systematic review of response rates for the two types of surveys, for instance, found that internet surveys had an average response rate of 33%, compared to 56% for paper questionnaires [12, 13]. We opted for the email survey, as it was the most practical way of reaching recipients worldwide.

The final tool was sent to all current PRs whose email addresses we had, with instructions that it should be filled by persons most involved with the management of the Fund's programmes. We sent a total of 315 emails; 156 and 159 to government and non-government PRs respectively. The emails explained that responses would be treated confidentially, and that the identities of individual PRs and countries would not be presented. An incentive of an Amazon voucher worth \$25 was included for each filled questionnaire. Two reminder emails were sent out, first after one week, and then after two and a half weeks. Responses were collated after a three-week waiting period.

Analysis was done using SPSS v20, and NVIVO 9 was used for content analysis of data from the open-ended questions. The unit of analysis was the PR across all variables. Proportions were given for key outcomes including characteristics of the organisation, views and perceptions on key Global Fund processes, as well as opinions on aspects of the Fund's operations that were most in need of improvement. Outcomes were reported, first across all PRs, then by PR type, and finally, by geographic region. Different questions had different response rates. We have reported figures based on the number of responses obtained for each question (meaning the denominator varied across questions).

3. Findings

3.1 Characteristics of PRs included in the survey

We received 128 responses from the 315 questionnaires. Thirteen were discarded as repetitions, leaving 115 completed questionnaires (36.5% response rate). Of these, 75 were in English, 22 French and 18 Spanish (65%, 19% and 16% for the three languages respectively).

The majority came from non-government PRs, despite the fact that the number of emails sent to government and non-government PRs were almost equal (19% response rate for government PRs, compared to a 54% response rate for non-government PRs). This explains why 75% of all responses came from the latter group (Table 2).

Table 2: General characteristics of the PRs that responded to the survey

Characteristic (number of respondents)	All PRs N* (%)	Government N (%)	Non- government N (%)
Type of PR	115 (%)	29 (25%)	86 (75%)
Geographic location of PR (n=107)			
Sub-Saharan Africa	47 (44%)	13 (50%)	33 (41%)
Other regions	60 (56%)	13 (50%)	47 (59%)
Period as PR (n=113)			
Two years and below	41 (36%)	7 (23%)	34 (41%)
More than two years	72 (64%)	22 (77%)	49 (59%)
Total number of Global Fund grants (n=114)			
One grant	49 (43%)	7 (24%)	42 (51%)
Two or more grants	64 (57%)	22 (76%)	40 (49%)
Total annual expenditure of PR in USD (n=107)			
10 million and less	57 (53%)	16 (55%)	41 (53%)
11-30 million	23 (22%)	6 (21%)	17 (22%)
Over 31 million	27 (25%)	7 (24%)	20 (25%)

* Some respondents did not respond to all questions, leading to variations in response rates for different questions.

There were more PRs from other regions compared to SSA (56% compared to 44%). Nearly two-thirds of organisations had been PRs for over two years, with most administering two or more Global Fund grants at the time of the survey (Table 2). Government PRs were more likely to have more than one grant (77% compared to 49% for non-government).

3.2 Opinions on grant requirements and management

Less than half of all PRs thought the grant requirements and procedures were straightforward; an even lower proportion said that the grant negotiation processes were straightforward (Tables 3a

and 3b). However, most felt that the progress update and disbursement request (PU/DR) was a useful way of reporting progress.

Only a third of PRs thought the grant rating method used reflected performance; another third saying they thought the price and quality reporting (PQR) system was easy to use.

More government PR respondents were happy with the grant management processes overall when compared to those working for non-government PR organizations (Table 3a).

Table 3: Opinions on grant management, rating and reporting

Table 3a: Opinions on grant management, rating and reporting stratified by PR type

Item	PRs who agreed with the statement		
	Overall Number (%)	Government Number (%)	Non-government Number (%)
Grant requirements and procedures are straightforward (n=107)	44 (41%)	15 (54%)	29 (37%)
Grant negotiation/signing procedures are straightforward (n=106)	38 (36%)	11 (39%)	27 (35%)
The PU/DR* processes are straightforward (n=106)	59 (55%)	18 (67%)	41 (52%)
The PU/DR is a useful method of reporting progress (n=106)	79 (75%)	23 (82%)	56 (72%)
The grant rating system accurately reflects performance (n=106)	36 (34%)	11 (39%)	25 (32%)
The PQR** system is straightforward and easy to use (n=105)	36 (34%)	12 (43%)	24 (31%)

* Progress updates and disbursement requests ** Price and quality reporting

SSA PRs were less likely to agree that grant negotiation and signing procedures were straightforward (Table 3b). Fewer respondents from SSA also thought the grant rating system was an accurate reflection of performance (22% compared to 46% for the other countries).

Table 3b: Opinions on grant management and reporting stratified by geographic location of PR

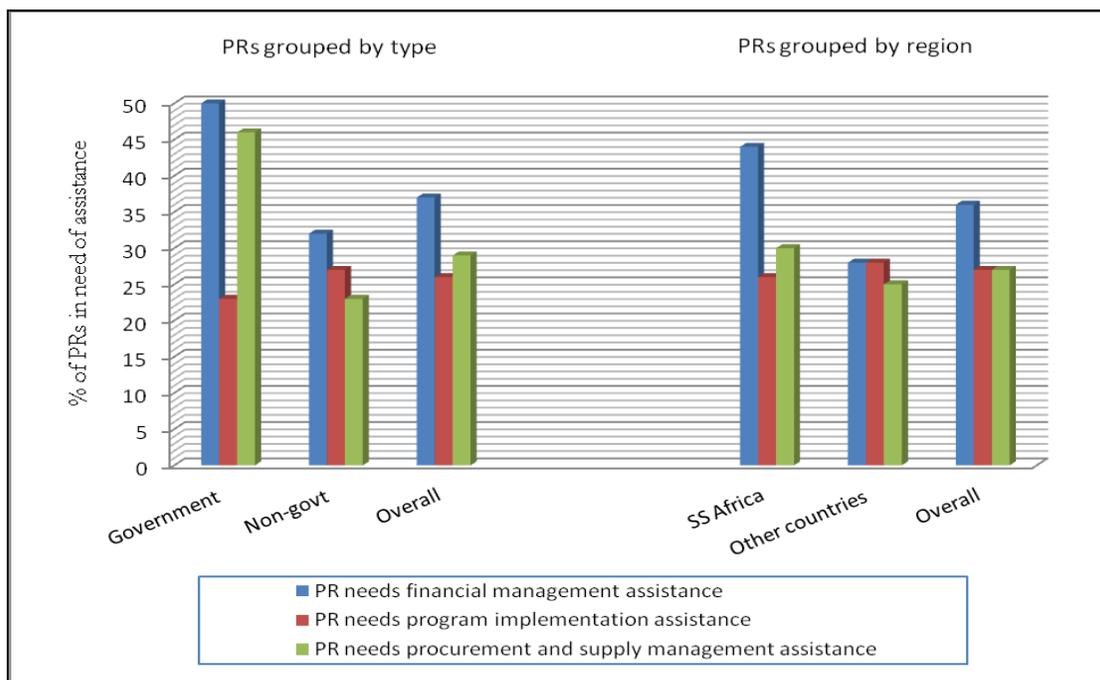
Item	PRs who agreed with the statement		
	Overall Number (%)	SS Africa Number (%)	Other countries Number (%)
Grant requirements and procedures are straightforward (n=107)	42 (42%)	16 (36%)	26 (48%)
Grant negotiation/signing procedures are straightforward (n=106)	38 (38%)	15 (34%)	23 (43%)
The PU/DR* processes are straightforward (n=106)	55 (60%)	24 (55%)	31 (57%)
The PU/DR is a useful method of reporting progress (n=106)	75 (76%)	35 (78%)	40 (75%)
The grant rating system accurately reflects performance (n=106)	35 (36%)	10 (22%)	25 (46%)
The PQR** system is straightforward and easy to use (n=105)	33 (34%)	10 (22%)	23 (43%)

* Progress updates and disbursement requests ** Price and quality reporting

3.3 Opinions on technical support from the Global Fund

A majority of PRs felt their organisations did not require technical support from the Global Fund (Figure 1). However, a third felt they needed support in financial management.

Figure 1: Opinions on requiring technical support from the Global Fund



A higher proportion of government PR respondents felt that they required assistance on financial management and on procurement and supply management (PSM) matters (50% and 46% respectively, compared to 32% and 23% for non-government organisations).

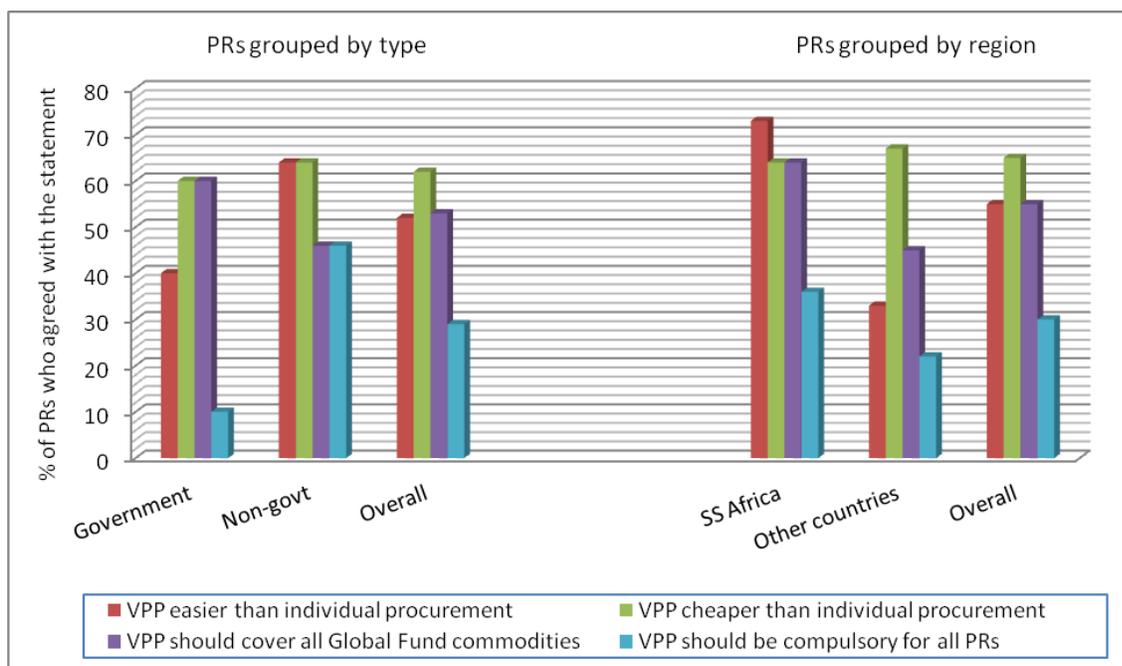
Stratification by region showed SSA PRs to have a higher need for technical assistance overall, but more so on financial management matters (Figure 1).

3.4 Procurement using the Voluntary Pooled Procurement system

Only 20% of respondents confirmed their organisations had used the Fund’s Voluntary Pooled Procurement (VPP) system for procuring commodities (32% and 14% of government and non-government PRs respectively; and 24% and 19% of SSA PRs and other PRs respectively).

Nearly two-thirds of those who had used the VPP thought the system made procurement cheaper compared to doing individual procurement (Figure 2). However, the suggestion to make the system compulsory was generally objected to.

Figure 2: Opinions on the voluntary pooled procurement system



Non-government PRs were generally happier with the VPP system, with the majority saying they thought it made the procurement process easier. Government PRs, on the other hand, strongly objected to the idea of making the system compulsory.

Over 70% of SSA PRs thought the VPP made procurement easier (compared to just over 33% for PRs from the other countries).

Although the majority of both SSA PRs and PRs from other countries objected to the idea of making the VPP compulsory, more from the former group were opposed to the idea (36% of SSA PRs objected, compared to 22% for PRs from other countries).

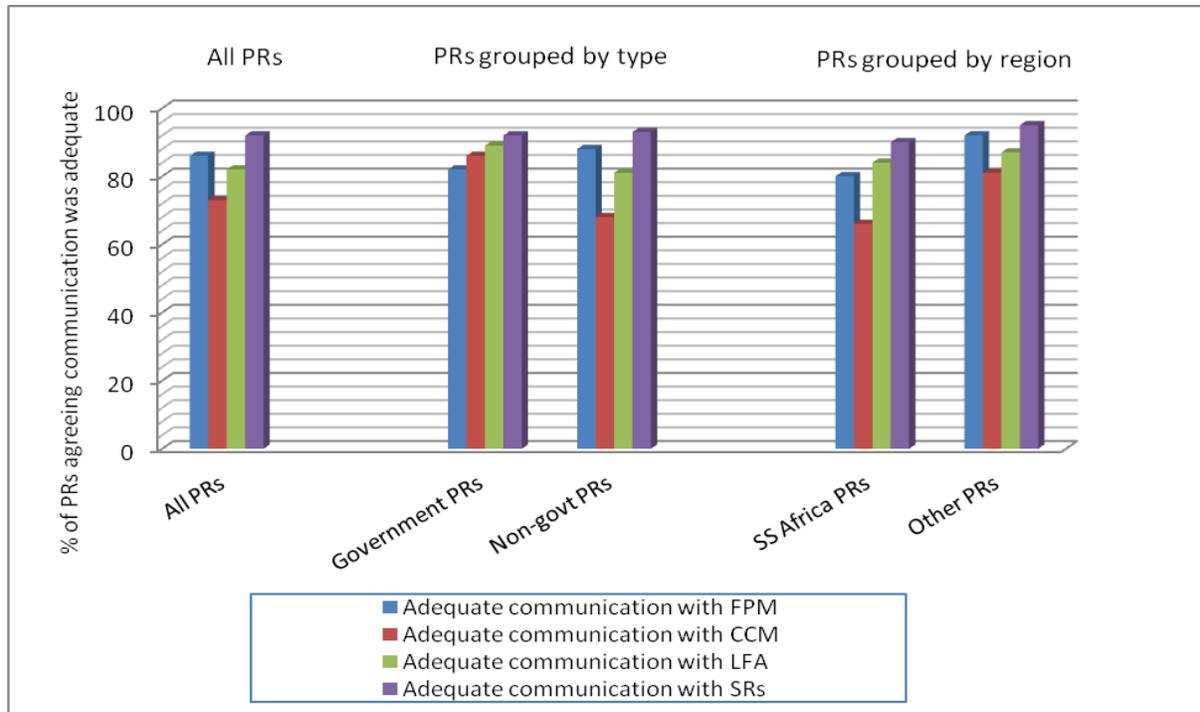
3.5 Communication and relationships with other actors

Government PRs were more likely to have a representative sitting on the CCM (68% compared to 43% for non-government PRs). Sub-Saharan Africa PRs were more likely to have a representative sitting in the CCM compared to organisations from the other regions (57%, compared to 44%).

Opinions on the effectiveness of communication varied across different actors (Figure 3). Most respondents thought their organisations enjoyed adequate communication with their SRs (92%) and FPMs (86%). However, a smaller proportion thought their organisations had adequate communication with CCMs and LFAs.

Sub-Saharan Africa PRs were generally less happy with the adequacy of communication with other actors, particularly the CCMs (66% compared to 81% for other countries).

Figure 3: Adequacy of communication with other actors



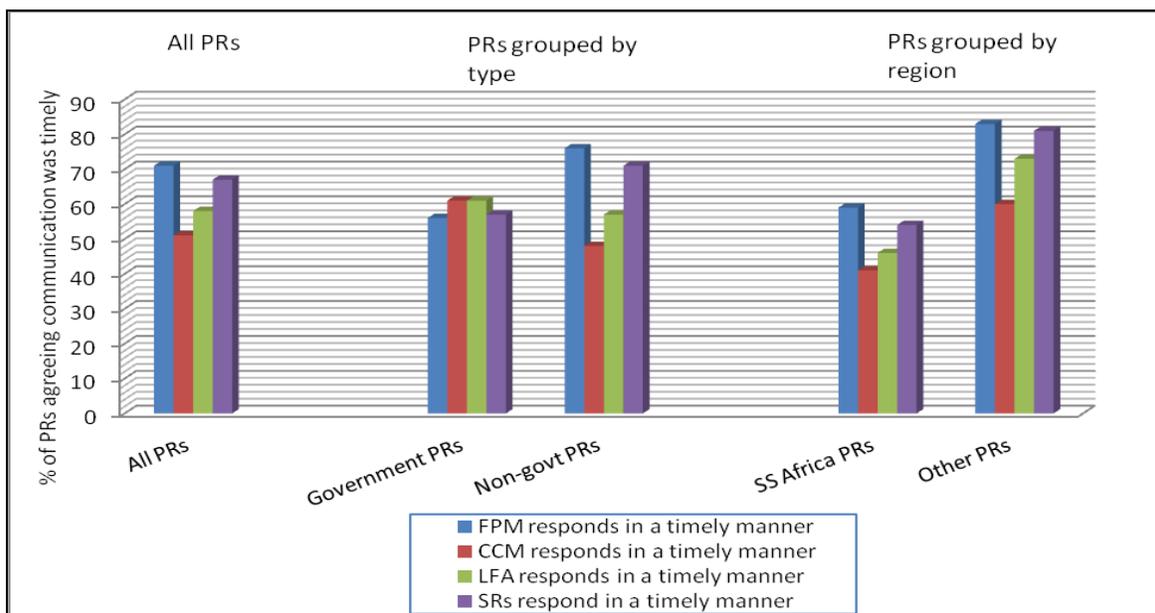
Response time to queries

Reactions to the question on the time taken to get a response followed a similar pattern to the one on adequacy of communication (Figure 4). PRs were generally happier with SR and FPM response times compared to LFA and CCM response times.

More government PRs were happy with CCM response time compared to non-government PRs (61% said CCMs respond in good time, compared to 48% for non-government PRs) However, non-government PRs were happier with the response time of SRs (71%, compared to 57% for government PRs).

SSA PRs were less happy with response times compared to PRs from other regions. Less than half of SSA PRs thought that CCMs respond in a timely manner compared to 73% of PRs from other regions. Similarly, only 41% of SSA PRs were happy with the LFA response time, compared to 60% for PRs from the other regions.

Figure 4: Time taken to respond to queries from PRs



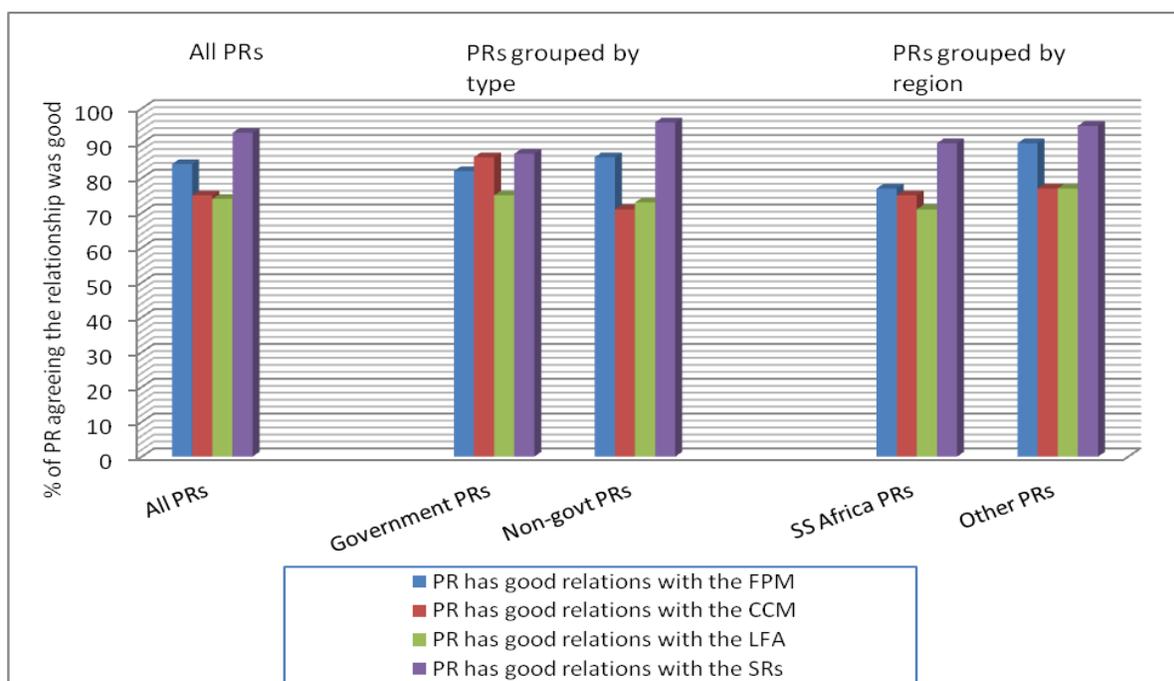
The nature of relationships between PRs and other actors

The nature of the working relationships varied across actors, with PRs enjoying good relations with all actors overall, but especially with SRs and FPMs (Figure 5). Over four-fifths of respondents felt their organisations had good working relations with SRs and FPMs (93% and 85% respectively).

Government PRs were more likely to report having good relations with CCMs (86% compared to 71% for non-government PRs). On the other hand, a higher proportion of non-government PRs reported having good relations with SRs (96% compared to 87% for government).

Stratification by region showed minimal difference in relationships between PRs and the other actors. However, a lower proportion of PRs from SSA reported having good relations with the FPM (77% compared to 90% for PRs from other regions).

Figure 5: Nature of relationships with other actors



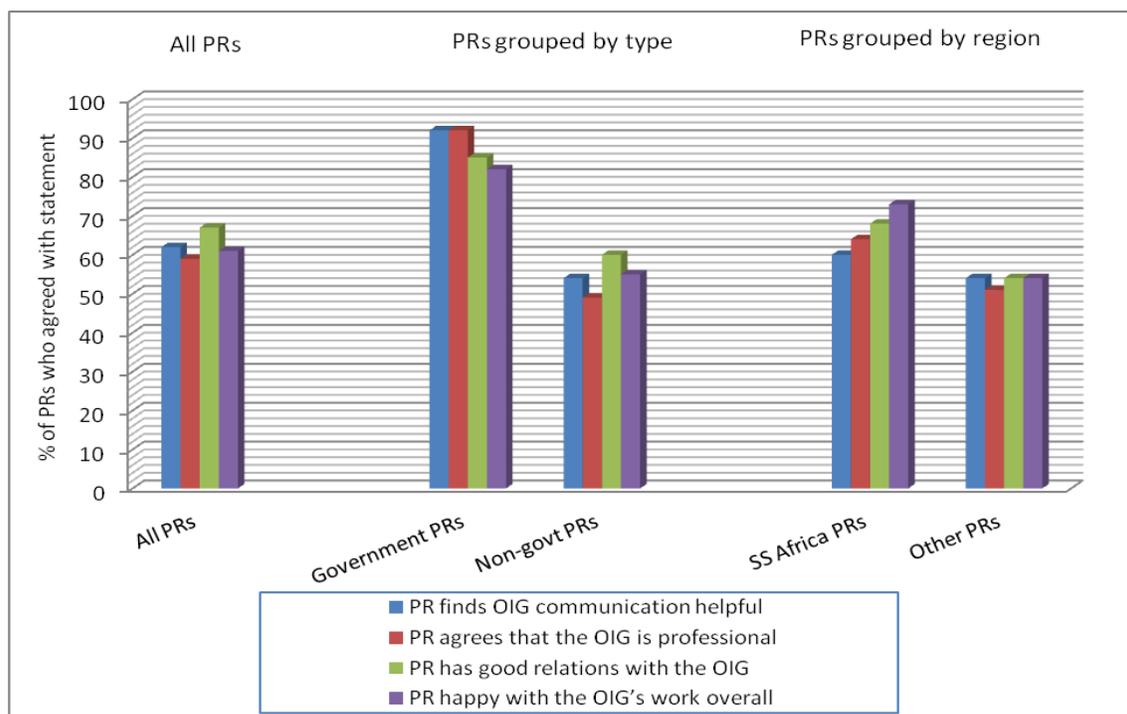
Relationship and communication with the OIG

Over half of all PRs (55%) said they had interacted with the OIG in the past; the proportion was slightly higher for non-government PRs compared to government PRs (56% vs. 50%).

Respondents thought that the relationship between PRs and the OIG was less cordial than the relationship between the PR and other actors (Figure 6). Only 67% of PRs reported having good relations with the OIG, compared to 84% and 93% of PRs who said they enjoyed good relations with the FPMs and SRs respectively. About 61% of PRs said they were happy with the work being done by the OIG overall.

More government PRs were happy with the OIG than non-government PRs. Over 90% of government PRs thought the OIG was professional in its work, compared to only 49% for non-government PRs. Similarly, over four-fifths of government PRs thought the OIG was doing a good job compared to just over half of the non-government PRs.

Figure 6: Communication and relationship with the OIG



Sub-Saharan African PRs have interacted more with the OIG compared to those from other regions (73% versus 54%). The former were also happier with the OIG’s work overall, with nearly two thirds saying they thought the OIG conducted its activities professionally, compared to 50% for PRs from other regions. Nearly three-quarters of SSA PRs also said they were happy with the OIG’s work overall, compared to 54% for PRs from other regions of the world.

3.6 Causes of delays in grant implementation

This section presents findings from an open-ended question on PR experiences with grant implementation delays. Over half the respondents (57%) said their organisations had experienced delays in grant implementation in the past. Delays were reported more often by government PRs (68% compared to 54% for non-government PRs).

“Disbursement delay” was the most common cause for delayed implementation. The reasons given for delayed disbursements included: poor communication and coordination between the PR and other actors; protracted grant negotiation and signing processes; late submission of documents to the Secretariat; and delays in receiving final approval from the Secretariat.

Besides delayed disbursements, PRs mentioned “inadequate support” as contributing to delayed implementation. In this context, LFAs, CCMs and the government were specifically identified. The LFAs were reported as spending too much time doing PR reviews, with some respondents complaining that LFA staff lacked public health expertise. There were also some claims that

LFAs did not know what their roles were. The CCMs and the government were blamed for failing to facilitate PR activities. The PRs complained of excessive bureaucratic requirements from various government entities, including delays in approving the use of donor funds in some places.

Lack of financial and programmatic management capacity were also mentioned as causes for delayed programme implementation. Some respondents, for instance, complained that SRs and those managing the smaller public health facilities were unqualified or unable to collect and report financial data. High staff turnover was linked to delays; one respondent complained of recruitment challenges and high staff turnover due to their organisation providing services to stigmatized and criminalised groups. Some PRs questioned their own ability to assess the capacity and manage SRs. Others blamed the Fund's changing requirements, arguing that there were complexities involved in changing PR systems and orienting staff whenever new grant requirements are introduced.

3.7 Areas in need of improvement

The second open-ended question asked PRs which areas the Global Fund should most focus on improving. The respondents identified three broad areas: 1) clarifying the role and functions of actors; 2) improving Global Fund processes; and 3) working on various other areas, including building the capacity of PRs to adapt to new changes in the grant management system. We discuss these briefly, and include a few direct quotes from the survey responses.

Clarifying the role and functions of actors

Clarifying and strengthening the roles of different actors was by far the most common suggestion. The majority of respondents specifically asked that the roles of CCMs and LFAs be better defined in order to minimise confusion and reduce duplication. There were suggestions that the Fund take a more proactive role in ensuring CCMs are properly constituted, and that they be actively involved in supporting and overseeing the activities of PRs. There were also suggestions that the Fund periodically evaluate the performance of CCMs.

“Our CCM is completely useless and the Global Fund doesn't do a thing. There needs to be an independent review of performance with consequences for not fulfilling roles. The CCM's responsibilities seem to be divided and forced upon PRs.” **Non-government PR**

There were also concerns that a one-system-fits-all approach to governance was inappropriate, and that terms of reference for CCMs and LFAs should be adaptable. Some respondents felt that this would minimise role duplication, reduce delays and increase country ownership.

Another widely shared suggestion was that the Fund should select LFAs with a good understanding of public health issues. The respondents felt that this would help in the periodic

progress reviews, as LFAs would understand why certain programmes were not implemented in the manner they were initially intended to be.

*“An issue that should worry the Fund is the technical capacity of the LFA. Our LFA is good on financial issues, but it should strengthen its technical side at least in the three diseases and understand the reality of the health system.” **Government PR***

*“Maybe there are experts within the LFA team who qualify for this job, but the people we work with are pretty much accountant type and no more. Overall, a disappointing experience with the current LFA...” **Non-government PR***

Finally, some PRs felt that the LFAs should share reports of evaluations and progress updates before submitting them to the Global Fund Secretariat. This, they argued, would help the PR make necessary improvements before programme implementation is adversely affected.

Besides strengthening the role and performance of in-country actors, there were suggestions to increase Global Fund presence in countries. Some PRs felt that just having an LFA was insufficient, and that the Fund should have an office where PRs can report issues and get quick responses. They also felt that this would enable the Fund to understand programme implementation realities.

*“The Fund should consider a local staff (regional). Although we have very good communication with our portfolio manager, a local presence would give more attention and monitor country programmes. The LFA functions as an accounting firm, and often does its job without assessing our comments...” **Non-government PR***

Some PRs felt the Global Fund should also increase the number of grant management staff in Geneva to reduce waiting times and enable the Fund to provide direct technical support to PRs. There were concerns over slow and poor communication of decisions from the Fund.

*“Disbursement processing takes far too long without any explanation as to where we are in the process or when the transfer can be expected. It's like you're talking to the man behind the curtain in the Wizard of Oz sometimes.” **Non-government PR***

*“They (Global Fund) should be clearer on what exactly they want. They should give templates and clear forms instead of expecting PRs to read their minds...” **Non-government PR***

There were also concerns about what some termed as “excessively high turnover” of FPMs. Those who raised this concern felt that staff transfers slowed down programme implementation, as new FPMs had to be given the same information as held by their predecessors.

Improving Global Fund processes

Several respondents felt that the Fund should make the grant negotiation processes easier for faster disbursements. There were suggestions that the Fund should reduce the number of approval procedures. Some said, for instance, that once the proposal and budget are approved, there was no point in seeking separate approvals for training and procurement plans.

Some PRs expressed optimism that the new funding model would speed up the processes.

*“The recent approval of the new funding mechanism will address delays in fund disbursements and also result in improved working relationship between the Secretariat and the PR.” **Non-government PR***

*“From what we have seen in the past 12 months, the Global Fund is moving in the right direction, but still has a long way to go.” **Government PR***

Other areas of improvement

Concerns were expressed about the confusion that follows periodic changes in the Global Fund’s requirements, with some PRs suggesting that a structured orientation system be introduced. They felt that this would reduce the back-and-forth with the Secretariat and speed up the approval processes.

There were also fears that the new funding model would render some countries ineligible for support. These fears were mainly voiced by PRs from countries whose income classification had recently been revised upwards. The respondents recommended that the Global Fund specify clearly which countries would be eligible and what kinds of programmes would be funded.

*“We need clarity on continuity of funding after the current programme cycle. Are middle income countries allowed to apply? And will there be specific MARPs (most at risk populations) streams under the funding?” **Non-government PR***

Another suggestion was that PRs be given more flexibility to re-programme approved funds. Some respondents felt that the Global Fund should develop guidelines on how funds can be redirected to more urgent needs in the middle of a programme implementation period. They felt that this would strengthen the Fund’s commitment to the principle of country ownership and at the same time ensure that resources go towards high impact programmes.

*“The Fund should allow us to re-orientate certain budget lines to others, and clear processes that would enable us to be more reactive. At the moment, we have guidelines of yearly changes and processes, but for more urgent and small-scale re-orientations, it is not clear how much we are allowed to do.” **Non-government PR***

One area that received wide criticism was the Fund's grant-rating methodology. A number of respondents felt that the system was overly numerical, with little focus on the more qualitative components of programme success. They felt that a qualitative assessment component would give a better picture of performance, especially for programmes focusing on health and community systems strengthening.

"(The Fund should) rethink the impact and outcome indicators, especially when it applies to PRs focused on community systems strengthening. They should consider non-quantitative measures for evaluating programme performance." **Non-government PR**

Some respondents also felt that the Fund should put more weight on contextual factors when interpreting programme performance.

"I think the Global Fund should appreciate a country's operational environment. In our case, we had an economic meltdown. This affected funding disbursements and delayed implementation, and as such, the country PRs lost their role to UNDP, yet they had the capacity to remain as PR. The performance was also affected during the transition period." **Non-government PR**

Some respondents gave recommendations aimed at strengthening procurement and commodity management. Some felt, for example, that the Fund should provide direct support on procurement issues, and sensitise recipients on the VPP system. There was a feeling among some PRs that the VPP system will become increasingly important in the coming years.

"The Global Fund needs to sensitize PRs about the VPP, since most procurement will be done using this mechanism." **Non-government PR**

4. Discussion

Principal recipients are directly responsible for the oversight and implementation of all Global Fund programmes. For this reason, they represent an important intervention point for efforts to improve the Fund's performance. Few studies have described the views and perceptions of PRs, let alone asked for their opinions on what would improve their operational experiences. The few studies we found were relatively old, focused mainly on understanding specific aspects of the PR, and were usually country or region-specific [7, 14–16].

The survey found that most PRs were somewhat unhappy with the grant management processes. Most thought the grant negotiation and signing processes should be simplified. Most also thought that the frequency of changes should be minimised, and that the Global Fund should put more effort in explaining new requirements. The Fund has in the past been criticized for blaming PRs for poor grant performance without providing them with adequate guidance and support [4].

Another area of concern was the Global Fund's perceived rigidity concerning re-programming of funds. On the one hand, some felt the Fund should provide clearer guidance on how money should be spent, while on the other hand, others thought they should be given more discretion to decide how money should be used. The opposing views betray tension that is inherent in the Fund's principles of country ownership (which gives countries discretion) and performance-based funding (which requires adherence to agreed targets). The Fund needs to find a balance between allowing some re-programming within implementation periods and ensuring initially agreed targets are not altered excessively. This may become less of a problem if the recently approved new funding model is operationalised well. The new model is designed to, among other things, increase direct engagement between the Global Fund and the PRs, and respond better to variations in country priorities and contexts [5].

Most PRs thought the current grant rating methodology is not a fair reflection of performance. The Fund applies a standard grant performance assessment methodology, which guides decisions on the regular disbursement amounts, and whether or not to renew a grant [17]. Grants are placed into one of five categories: A1 (exceeding expectations), A2 (meeting expectations), B1 (adequate), B2 (inadequate but potential demonstrated), and finally, C (unacceptable) [17]. Grants with a C rating will usually not receive subsequent disbursements [18]. As grant ratings are a central feature of the performance-based funding principles, it is important for PRs to be convinced that they are an accurate reflection of performance. However, some PRs felt that while the current system captured quantitative measures, it has limited capacity to reflect the more qualitative aspects of programme performance. Similar views were expressed in an Aidspan analysis report on the Fund's role in community systems strengthening [19]. Besides examining why some PRs have low confidence in the rating system, more effort should also go towards exploring ways of integrating qualitative and quantitative measures of performance.

Reports that government bureaucracy and insufficient government support was slowing down grant implementation are worrisome. It is not the first time PRs have raised concerns over this. In Tanzania, for instance, the requirement that all foreign aid go through the finance ministry was reported to slow down implementation, whereas excessive government bureaucratic processes were linked to massive delays in procurement of bed-nets in Ethiopia [6, 20]. Governments should do more to reduce these bottlenecks and speed up implementation.

Most PRs felt they were sufficiently equipped and did not require direct assistance from the Global Fund. However, there were calls to develop systems that will ensure recipient organisations are well informed about changes in the Fund's requirements and procedures. Past studies have linked PR capacity problems to high staff turnover and changing requirements from the Global Fund [6, 21]. Some respondents complained that high FPM turnover slowed down their work. Different FPMs have in the past been reported to have different demands from in-country actors, causing confusion and slowing down programme implementation [22]. This could be reduced if country communications were channeled to teams rather than individuals at the Fund, and if Global Fund requirements were standardised and made sufficiently clear.

The majority of the 23 respondent PRs who had used the VPP system thought it made procurement cheaper and easier. This is in line with the Fund's own assessment, which linked the VPP to better commodity governance, lowered prices, improved terms and conditions from suppliers (including conditions given to PRs who procure small volumes) and better commodity availability, particularly in countries where risks of stock-outs were previously high [23, 24].

While the VPP's value was acknowledged, the suggestion to make it compulsory was opposed, particularly among government PRs and PRs from regions outside SSA. A number of reasons may explain why government PRs had such strong objection. It may be that government agencies have sufficient capacity and experience in procurement, or it may reflect a pursuit of self interest among staff which is easier under a non-compulsory procurement system. Procurement of drugs has been widely linked to corruption; some observers estimate that 10–25% of public procurement resources are lost to corruption in poor countries [25, 26].

Although the VPP remains voluntary, the Secretariat can require a PR to use the facility if they are deemed to have inadequate procurement capacity [27, 28]. It is important we understand why some PRs were objected to the idea of making it compulsory, but this survey did not ask for reasons for this opinion.

Nearly all PRs thought their communication and working relations with the FPMs and SRs were good (which we call vertical communication). However, fewer felt the same about CCMs and LFA, the other main in-country actors (we call this horizontal communication). Poor horizontal communication has been described in the past, with CCMs being blamed for failing to provide support and leadership [16]. A previous evaluation found that only half of CCMs had documented ways of conducting PR oversight activities [30]. There are ongoing efforts to address this and an enhanced performance framework is being developed to strengthen the

oversight role of CCMs [31]. While CCMs are an innovative governance concept, their success depends on effective communication with the other in-country actors.

One reason why CCMs may not carry out their oversight role effectively is the presence of members of the PR organisation on the CCMs. This was reported particularly among government PRs and in SSA organisations. Having PR representatives sitting on the CCM may create conflict of interest. The CCMs have to nominate PRs through a clear and transparent process. However, past experience shows that this may not happen where conflict of interest exists. The decision to pick a PR in Uganda, for instance, was reportedly influenced by the CCM chair, who had a strong affiliation with the organisation that was selected [32].

While the presence of PR members in the CCMs creates conflict of interest, requiring that they be excluded is not without problems either. In Zambia, for instance, removal of PR members from the CCM resulted in reduced involvement of the CCM in grant programme oversight [6]. This calls for more innovative thinking around CCMs' composition, including the possibilities of having alternate CCM membership, or requiring that members with possible conflict of interest abstain from voting in certain instances. However, countries need to take the lead in minimising CCM conflict of interest because direct involvement by the Global Fund may be perceived as going against the principle of country ownership.

Communication and interaction with LFAs was also problematic, with PRs complaining that LFAs lacked assessment capacity. Similar views have been expressed elsewhere. Past assessments have shown LFAs to have good financial management skills, but limited programmatic capacity on health-related issues [15, 22, 34–36]. One of the recommendations from a Global Fund tracking survey in Uganda, for instance, was that the country should form stronger relationships between the Fund and technical country-based partners whose health sector programmatic capacity was higher than that of LFAs [32]. There were also complaints of delays by the LFA in conducting assessments. Similar concerns have been expressed elsewhere. In Zambia PRs complained that some of the reports they had prepared for the Secretariat (submitted through the LFA) had never been delivered [15].

To date, LFAs have operated as complete packages, offering financial and programmatic oversight activities on behalf of the Fund. Going forward, the Fund should put more effort in assessing the capacity of LFAs to deliver on both fronts; where inadequacies are observed, the LFA should be compelled to strengthen their capacity before assuming the LFA functions.

It is not clear why the government and non-government PRs had such varied views on the OIG. While over half of non-government PRs thought the OIG's conduct was not professional, nearly all government respondents thought the inspector's office conducted its activities professionally. Similarly, more SSA PRs thought the OIG was doing its job professionally. While these may be genuine differences in opinions on the OIG, it may also reflect a bias, where government and SSA PRs did not want to appear as painting the OIG in bad light. The latter is a real possibility,

considering that governments and SS-African countries are the largest beneficiaries of the Global Fund.

The OIG has been instrumental in identifying grant governance problems and financial mismanagement, leading to improved use of funds (see GFO article [here](#)). However, the office increasingly received criticism for the manner in which it operated, leading to the dismissal of the head in November 2012 (see article [here](#)). An interim Inspector General has since been appointed, but this was after this survey was completed. Future research should aim to understand factors that influence how the OIG interacts with PRs, and to examine whether the difference between the views of the different PR categories is genuine.

5. Conclusion

The survey sought to understand grant negotiation and implementation experiences of PRs, and get opinions on which aspects of the Global Fund operations need improvement.

The survey reported a mixed picture of opinions and experiences with the Global Fund. On the positive side, PRs were happy with the content and speed of communication with FPMs. They also found the VPP system useful. However, most PRs were unhappy with specific processes such as the grant negotiation and signing process, and the grant rating system. Recommendations from PRs included simplifying grant negotiation and approval processes, and finding performance assessment methods that are not limited to measuring improvements in numbers.

Some PRs were of the opinion that in-country communication was not optimal, resulting in the slowing down of disbursements and programme implementation. A portion of the PRs were also unhappy with the work done by the OIG. The Global Fund should put in place mechanisms to promote communication and collaborative working between LFAs, CCMs and PRs, and explore why the PRs were not happy with the way the OIG works.

When asked which aspects of the Global Fund operations needed improvement, most PRs said the Fund should re-define and clarify the roles of different actors such as the CCMs and LFAs, minimise FPM staff turnover, and shorten the grant negotiation and approval processes. All these are currently being addressed, either directly or indirectly, under the Fund's 2012–2016 Strategy and under the new funding model that was approved in November 2012. Vigorous assessments should follow the roll-out of the new model to ensure improvements are realised in these areas.

6. Limitations

Although the survey was sent to nearly the same number of government and non-government PRs, the majority of responses came from the latter group. This may reflect a lack of accuracy in our email contacts list for government PRs, or it may be an indication of a higher willingness to respond among non-government PRs.

It may also be that the emails landed on the “wrong” desk, something that is more likely to happen in government organisations that would normally have a higher number of staff and departments. Future research should explore reasons for the response rate variations, and examine whether this reflects broader communication challenges or problems between the various Global Fund actors (for instance, whether government PRs respond slower/poorly to queries from the FPMs or LFAs). Regional variations in response rates were minimal overall.

Many respondents also skipped some questions, presumably because they felt they were not well placed to answer them. While care was taken to ensure the questions were broad enough to be answered by one person with good knowledge of the organisation, it is possible that respondents did not have certain information at hand, or did not trust that the information they had was accurate. Another probable reason for skipping questions is respondents fearing to paint their organisations as inadequate or lacking capacity to undertake certain roles. This bias may have also led some respondents to provide inaccurate information in an effort to “protect” their organisation. We nonetheless expect that most responses were valid, having sent emails explaining the confidentiality attached to the survey.

Finally, although the survey was administered in English, French and Spanish, there is a possibility that respondents who do not speak any of the three languages would have failed to respond. A number of Global Fund-supported countries speak other languages, including Russian, Portuguese and Arabic.

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Appendix

Survey questionnaire

(Reformatted to fit in the report)

Section 1: Principal Recipient (PR) Characteristics

1. In which country are you based? Please choose one *(drop-down with options)*
2. What is the name of your organization _____
3. Which of the following best describes your organization as a Principal Recipient (PR) for Global Fund grants? Please choose one *(drop-down with options)*
4. What is the total length of time your organization has ever been a PR in this country? Please choose one *(drop-down with options)*
5. What is the total number of grants your organization ever has administered as a PR in this country (past and present)? Please choose one *(drop-down with options)*
6. What is the total number of GF grants currently being administered by your organization?
7. Are you a recipient of other donor funding? *(Skip logic for yes)*
8. If you answered yes to Q7 above, please indicate how many other donors give you funds
9. What was the total annual expenditure of your organization for 2011 in USD:

Section 2: Grant Governance, Operation and Reporting

10. Please rate your level of agreement with the following statements concerning the GF grant management system
(Agreed, disagreed, neither agreed or disagreed responses)
 - i. The current Global Fund grant management requirements and procedures are straightforward and easy to follow
 - ii. The Global Fund's grant negotiation and signing processes are straightforward and easy to engage in
 - iii. The Progress Update / Disbursement Request (PU/DR) processes are straightforward and easy to follow
 - iv. The Global Fund's grant rating system is an accurate reflection of the performance of PRs
 - v. The Global Fund's Price and Quality Reporting (PQR) system is straightforward and easy to use

Section 3: Commodity procurement through Voluntary Pooled Procurement (VPP)

11. Has your organization ever procured commodities using the Global Fund's Voluntary Pooled Procurement (VPP) system?
12. Please rate your level of agreement with the following statements concerning the VPP
 - i. The procedures and requirements for joining the VPP system are straightforward and easy to follow
 - ii. Using the Voluntary Pooled Procurement system is easier than doing individual procurement of commodities
 - iii. Using the Voluntary Pooled Procurement system is more affordable than doing individual procurement
 - iv. The Global Fund should consider expanding the VPP system to cover all HIV, malaria and TB commodities
 - v. The Global Fund should consider making the VPP compulsory across all PRs

Section 4: Relationships and Communication with other Actors

Fund Portfolio Manager (FPM):

13. Do you know your Fund Portfolio Manager (FPM)?
14. Approximately how many times did your FPM physically visit your offices in the country in 2011?
15. In the last one month, approximately how many times did your organization receive official communication (email, letter, telephone call) from your FPM?
16. Looking back over the last 12 months, approximately how many times did your organization receive official communication (email, letter, telephone call) from your FPM?
17. Please rate your level of agreement with the following statements concerning your organisation's relationships and communication with your FPM in the past 12 months
 - i. My organization has adequate communication with our FPM
 - ii. Our FPM responds to our queries in a timely manner
 - iii. Communication and advice from our FPM is clear and useful to our work
 - iv. Overall my organization has a good working relationship with the FPM

Country Coordinating Mechanism (CCM):

18. Is there any member of your organization who is also a member of the (CCM)?
19. Please rate your level of agreement with the following statements concerning your relationships and communication with the CCM in the past 12 months
 - i. My organization has adequate communication with our CCM
 - ii. Our FPM responds to our queries in a timely manner
 - iii. Communication and advice from our CCM is clear and useful to our work
 - iv. Overall my organization has a good working relationship with the CCM

Local Fund Agents (LFA)

20. Please rate your level of agreement with the following statements concerning relationships and communication with the Local Fund Agent (LFA) in the last 12 months
 - i. My organization has adequate communication with our LFA
 - ii. Our FPM responds to our queries in a timely manner
 - iii. Communication and advice from our LFA is clear and useful to our work
 - iv. Overall my organization has a good working relationship with the LFA

Sub-Recipients

21. Does your organization have any Sub-Recipient (s)? If so, how many SRs do you have?
22. Please rate your level of agreement with the following statements about your relationship with SRs (if more than one SR, then focus on the biggest SR in terms of funding given)
 - i. My organization has adequate communication with our SR
 - ii. Our SR responds to our queries in a timely manner
 - iii. Communication from our SR is clear and useful to our work
 - iv. Overall my organization has a good working relationship with our SR
23. What is your level of agreement with the following statements about your organization's management and relationship with SRs broadly?
 - i. I believe that the guidance provided by the Global Fund, on how to manage and relate with SRs, is sufficient
 - ii. I believe that the systems that SRs use for reporting to us, are sufficient
 - iii. I believe that my organization has sufficient capacity to manage all our SRs
 - iv. I believe that my organization generally enjoys good relationships with most of our SRs

Office of the Inspector General (OIG)

- 24. Has your organization ever interacted/communicated with the Office of the Inspector General
- 25. If you answered yes to Question 24? above, please rate your level of agreement with the following statements about your relationship with OIG
 - i. My organization has cordial relations with the OIG
 - ii. Communication from the OIG is clear and useful to our work
 - iii. The OIG conducts its activities in a professional manner
 - iv. Overall my organization is happy with the work being done by the OIG
- 26. Has your organization ever been investigated by the OIG on claims of fraud or mismanagement of funds in any way?

Financial management and programmatic support from the Global Fund

- 27. In your opinion, do you feel like your organization needs direct assistance from the GF on the following matters (through appointing specialists to help you out, for instance)?
 - i. My organization needs GF assistance in financial management matters
 - ii. My organization needs GF technical assistance in disease program implementation matters
 - iii. My organization needs GF technical assistance in procurement and supply chain management of commodities
- 28. Has your organization experienced delays in grant implementation over the last 12 months?
- 29. If you answered yes to question 28 above, please indicate briefly what contributed to the delay in grant implementation

- 30. The GF has been undergoing changes over the last 12 or so months. Please indicate 2 areas you feel are most in need of improvement