



Independent observer
of the Global Fund

Finally, a novel about the Global Fund!

Following 'Onu Soit Qui Mal Y Pense', [Roberto Garcia Saez's](#) first novel on the Global Fund, Harrison and Romero's adventures continue in 'Dee Dee Paradize'.

1. Roberto, please tell our readers more about you...

I am French from a Spanish family that fled Franco's regime in Spain and settled in France at the end of the Second World War. I studied socioeconomics then worked with international organizations like the European Union, the Global Fund and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). I have been running a global health consultancy firm called HMST for 10 years.

I am part of the generation that joined the Global Fund in its early days in 2002, initially in the Secretariat, then as a Principal Recipient Coordinator, as a Technical Review Panel member and then I did more than 50 Global Fund assignments. So, I am very attached to the Global Fund, because the concept represented everything that we wanted in response to top-down international development approaches, dictated by neo-colonialist capital cities in Europe. The Global Fund advocated a bottom-up approach, with the creation of Country Coordinating Mechanisms (CCMs), which were supposed to reflect multisectoral governance, financing for approaches developed in and by countries, and the involvement and promotion of stakeholders who had previously had little or no voice, namely civil society representatives. The Global Fund was then able to equip itself with the significant resources needed to achieve its ambitions.

2. How did your writing adventure come about?

It wasn't at all planned. I was working in international development and had been lucky enough to get senior positions at a very young age. At that point, it seemed like my career and my life were already

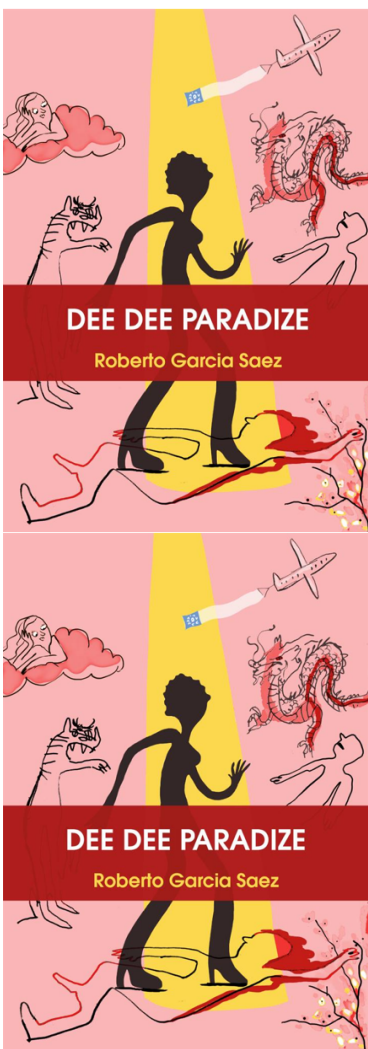
mapped out. But I hit a stumbling block and a particular event threw all this up in the air. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, I led the UNDP team in charge of managing Global Fund grants, amounting to more than \$250 million for the three diseases. Consultants we had recruited were involved in an embezzlement, and I was wrongly accused of collusion. Various inquiries and criminal investigations ensued, and I was sucked into a downward spiral and made a scapegoat, which I hadn't expected to happen. All of a sudden, some people around me started to doubt me, to the extent that I had no other choice but to take UNDP to court to prove I was innocent, because the UN agency had let me down mid-fight. Fortunately, at the time, the United Nations tribunal had just been created and I was able to benefit from impartial treatment. Not only was I cleared but I also received compensation. This painful episode lasted four years.

This unexpected "adventure" led to my first novel 'ONU Soit Qui Mal Y Pense', published in 2011, which tells this story in fictional form. It was a way of showing my side of the story as well as an outlet. The book sold 3,500 copies. It goes to show that you should never give up and you should keep fighting. A musical based on the novel also came out, which ran for 45 shows in a 300-seat Paris theater in 2012. That's how I got a taste for writing. I took lessons and also received advice from a friend who was a journalist. That desire to tell stories through writing is still with me.

Paradoxically, this experience turned out to be one of the greatest opportunities of my life as it pushed me to my limits. In particular, I had to deal with those around me seeing me in a new light, with their doubts about my integrity, and with continuous rumors. I got to understand myself better and recognize my fears and limits and, in a way, to acknowledge my arrogance, that had developed alongside my professional success. And thanks to this, I was able to explore new horizons.

3. What are your two novels about?

When the first novel was reissued, we changed the title to 'Un éléphant dans une chaussette.' The second, 'Dee Dee Paradize', is the sequel and is named after one of the main characters.



The first novel focuses on Patrick Roméro, a successful humanitarian worker sent to the DRC in the midst of war to manage an emergency program implemented by the United Nations (which is as difficult as putting an elephant in a sock due to high levels of bureaucracy), who decides to take certain liberties with processes to speed up the work. He is prosecuted by Paul Harrisson, an English policeman in charge of combatting corruption. What the book shows is quite dark. Money and personal ambition are key topics. We meet cynical and ambitious civil servants, politicians and career-driven diplomats as well as humanist dreamers. The book also talks about the hopes of many different people I have met during my assignments in Africa and Asia, who truly want to make a difference and help people and who are frustrated by the absurdities and limitations of the way we do international development.

The sequel, *Dee Dee Paradize*, is more of a free ride. It focuses on human beings, on how complex they are and on the dilemmas they face. My books also tell the story of the HIV response and, through Dee Dee, a transgender character, of the struggles that LGBT people face. It is also about competition between organizations for financial resources, oversized egos and the collective response. Above all, my novels emphasize the tremendous progress that was made possible thanks to HIV activists: it was a response led by the people who are affected and centered on human rights. Through these books, I want to celebrate the freedom to make your own choices, the creativity to do new things, the ability to bounce back after facing hardships and to rebuild self-confidence. The things of life, in a way.

4. But isn't your viewpoint that of a middle-aged white man?

Of course, and I am aware of it. I am lucky and honored to have been involved in key programs that ultimately changed the game in the response to major pandemics. All of this seemed unimaginable 20 years ago. But I am aware that white male privilege does exist: there is a clear inequity and inequality

between the role and opportunities given to men and those granted to women. And of course, despite the end of the colonial era, white men continue to dictate many of the choices in countries benefitting from international development programs. This creates an unbalanced relationship in development, because even the large-scale multilateral funds are primarily provided by Western donors who have their own specific objectives around cultural and financial influence. There is even a certain level of denial among people working in these organizations, who may not acknowledge this situation. We sometimes convince ourselves that recipient countries have a say. But in practice, decisions are still too often taken in the capital cities of donor countries and organizations. Yet, I am hopeful because we should not underestimate the power of the young generation, who have thirst for equality and who bring new blood.

There will still be pitfalls because we are well aware that people do not give up their privileges easily; I know something about that! The Global Fund structure has made it possible to move towards a genuine rebalance, but after two decades, its limitations are also obvious. The trend could be genuinely rebalanced by giving decision-making power to countries, through the crucial role of CCMs in particular, which are part of the Global Fund DNA. They still need to be embedded in the highest decision-making platforms in beneficiary countries, involved in dialogues that happen between the highest political level (beyond ministries of health) in-country and Global Fund leaders, and in close and meaningful collaboration with a united civil society. This requires greater unity among all country stakeholders involved in dialogue with the Global Fund, meaningful CCM-led advocacy, and the courage to sometimes say “no” to the Global Fund and to go with one’s own vision, if necessary.

Maybe COVID will provide that opportunity, because topics on the agenda are broader than the three diseases, and they involve systemic discussions right up to the highest level.

5. Is this the type of thinking you want to trigger in the reader’s mind?

My first novel resulted from a feeling of exasperation with an increasingly bureaucratic system that made processes a self-serving goal. Processes were supposed to contribute to ensuring fairness, transparency and balance but it had become gospel and they were used without anyone understanding their purpose, as if processes were justified whatever the context. My dream is that the Global Fund will break free from this paralyzing spiral, which makes work at country level more complicated. How many times have I heard “No, but the Global Fund said....”

The other message I want to convey through these novels is about compassion: we operate in a competitive sector with a high level of competition for resources. This makes our personal choices and our ethics all the more important, and this is a key focus of these two novels. As the saying goes, “If you can’t change the world, change yourself”.

I would also like to say that we learn when we fall. Any fall from grace is an opportunity to understand, grow and move forward. You have to be careful not to stay on the ground too long though! Above all, you need to know how to forgive, but without forgetting. Like the famous Nelson Mandela quote says “forgiveness liberates the soul, it removes fear. That’s why it’s such a powerful weapon”

6. Is there a third novel in the pipeline?

I’m putting on a play called “L’oasis des doutes” (the story is taken from one of the chapters of my first novel) about a police investigation within the United Nations system. It will run for 15 days (end of March / beginning of April) in Amsterdam and will be performed in English.

I am also working on a new novel. This one is on a very different subject but one that is close to my heart: it's the story of my family, who emigrated to France to flee Franco's regime between 1939 and 1950. This caused heartbreak for the 500,000 political refugees who sought asylum in France. These decisions influenced the life of the next generation, mine...

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