



Independent observer
of the Global Fund

The Global Fund and the fears of transparency -

In 2002, the new Global Fund was a world leader in aid transparency. It had committed to publish a volume and level of technical details on its grants that was unprecedented in international development.

It was my privilege to be part of the Fund at that time, and to have my eyes opened to the complexity of delivering on transparency. It taught me that the disclosure of information alone is unlikely to bring about change in development aid (see [previous commentary](#).)

Yet it appears that the Global Fund has lost some ground in maintaining its founding commitment. According to the [2013 Aid Transparency Index](#), a global measure of donors' aid transparency, the Fund is now ranked sixth behind other organizations. While sixth is still 'good', it means that the Fund is no longer considered exemplary when it comes to transparency.

This turn of events may be explained by a number of reasons, both human and technical. The Global Fund is just like any other institution: made up of people who bring feelings, like fear, to work. And transparency, a great objective in principle, unleashes some of those fears: the fear of losing the support of donors (if data doesn't paint a positive picture of one's results) and of damaging working relationships with partners (if data highlights serious problems in the implementation of programs).

As a result, the natural tendency is to be protective about what filters out to the press, to spin and sometimes to self-censor. I'd like to share a few examples of what I experienced at the Fund and some ideas that may be helpful in adapting to the challenges ahead.

Communicating with the press

In January 2011, the Global Fund's honeymoon with the press came to an abrupt end. A wire story about

the outcome of some of its own investigations on corruption in Africa [spread like bushfire](#), jeopardizing hundreds of millions of dollars in donor contributions, paralyzing disbursements and severely slowing down grant implementation.

This first major crisis was a defining moment for how the Fund manages transparency. Some within the ecology felt bound to defend the Fund as a victim of its own openness, noting that it was the Fund's decision to release the investigation reports that was the foundation of the story. We in the Communications department were also partially responsible for how the story unfolded. Rather than widely sharing the information with journalists, we posted an [announcement](#) on the website before the holiday season and considered the job done. It was only two months later, when a journalist claimed that he had uncovered something, that we initiated our response. But by then, we were fighting allegations of a cover-up, rather than running the story.

Communicating on grant performance

The Global Fund depends on partnerships and collaboration among a highly diverse, yet interdependent, group of people. Grant recipients depend on the Fund's good ratings to keep on supporting their work; donors and the Global Fund depend on good performance by grant recipients to prove high impact from investment. In this context, there are competing pressures for communications and managing sensitivities and professional relationships.

Those competing pressures were likely responsible for the decision to abandon the web-based Early Alert and Response System (EARS) established in 2006 to identify poorly-performing grants and enable quick corrective measures.

As was outlined in the Five-Year Evaluation of the Global Fund ([PDF](#), p. 48), "the application of EARS has generated some mistrust among Global Fund partners who expressed concerns over the 'stigmatizing effect of the EARS list'". This conclusion was based on comments made at a regional meeting to the effect that "EARS could be used by NGOs to embarrass PRs (Principal Recipients) by going to the press. Information needs to be shared cautiously".

Opening up the communication gates

Social media has engendered a great deal of public mistrust in any institutions trumpeting their own success with highly packaged stories that only emphasize the good and downplay the bad; what is more 'successful' seems to be an openness to interactive engagement and a recognition that all does not always go as planned. The Global Fund is known for the high quality of its top-down communications (publications, photos, videos), but it stops short of support for online discussions with and among implementers and other in-country partners.

In 2007, the Global Fund created [MyGlobalFund.org](#), a social media website that invited free and open discussions on the implementation of grants and the Fund's strategic directions. This initiative initially raised doubts and legitimate concerns (summarized [here](#)). By opening up the communication gates, some wondered, how would the Fund avoid unleashing hordes of critics waiting to destroy its reputation? The results proved to be overwhelmingly professional and constructive. As of early 2009, MyGlobalFund had been used to hold several thematic discussions that led to a series of strategic recommendations, many of which were adopted by the Board. But it has been offline 'temporarily' since 2010 — which seems like a missed opportunity.

Recommendations

When millions of lives and billions of dollars are at stake, it makes sense to want to carefully control communications, limiting the message to a top-down approach. But I think that careful control has limited

the benefits and value that comes from transparency. Responsible image management and full transparency are not incompatible; it's not a stark choice between control and chaos. The Fund can reclaim its position as a leader in aid transparency while also playing by the new rules, and winning, in global communications.

First, it should encourage journalists to investigate the impact of Global Fund programs. As a steward of life-saving money for millions, the Fund has every reason to want to cautiously manage its external relations. But it cannot micromanage a global army of journalists, bloggers and activists. Instead, the Fund could seek to work more closely with journalists, providing proactive support for investigations into the use of grant funds and their impact and results, enlisting journalists as an early warning system. Moving towards aggressive promotion of transparency will help boost the Fund's credibility, build trust and shift the focus to the countries where progress is being made and concerns are being raised.

The Fund should also work to provide better tools for watchdogs and citizens to demand accountability from grant recipients at the country level. This means a more strategic website that features clearly visualizable data sets and infographics that will help strengthen the arguments for people in recipient countries to demand better accountability.

Finally, the Global Fund should deploy all of those experts and supporters around the world waiting to contribute to its success with their valuable experience, unique perspectives and constructive criticism. The Fund's website is an impressive repository of information, but it doesn't promote interaction and engagement. A more strategic use of social media that embraces permanent two-way communications with and among grant implementers and in-country experts will help it nurture the contributions of experts with first-hand experience of the fight against the three diseases in funded countries. The Fund is, and will remain, a giant learning experiment, regularly having to adjust to changing conditions. As such, it is one of the global organizations that stand to gain the most from a clever use of social media.

The world wants to be impressed as much by the Fund's results in saving lives as by its capacity to generate trust for the way it manages development aid. The Global Fund and all its data and information belong to the world. Half measures are not an option.

Robert Bourgoing is a strategic communications specialist. The views contained in this commentary are his own.

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