



Independent observer
of the Global Fund

NEW STRUCTURE AT GLOBAL FUND WILL REDUCE INFLUENCE OF CIVIL SOCIETY

It has taken a long time since the Global Fund was established for civil society (CS) to gain enough influence at both global and country levels. Recent changes at the Fund's Secretariat have, however, caused anxiety among civil society organisations (CSOs). They fear that dismantling the Fund's CS Team will reduce the influence of CSOs at the country level in governance, oversight and grant implementation.

The CS Team, which had nine officers, has been disbanded. Most of what this team was doing will become the responsibility of the Grant Management Division, mainly the fund portfolio managers (FPMs) in that division. The anxiety this has caused is based on fears that important aspects of what the CS Team did will be lost in the process. It is also not clear if the FPMs will be able to do as good a job as the CS Team did.

The CS Team was particularly close to partners' hearts at the country level, and was seen as the primary Global Fund liaison with civil society groups at that level and at the regional levels. It was an important feedback mechanism for ideas from the grassroots on the Global Fund's strategic development. The CS Team was also the focal point on issues about civil society for regional Global Fund units, FPMs and the Secretariat's country teams that support the FPMs.

The restructuring at the Secretariat that will affect the CS Team includes three key changes: (1) Work related to partnerships, including engagement with CS, has gone to the Grant Management Division. (2) Work related to community systems strengthening (CSS) has been integrated into a different division dealing with strategy, investment and impact. (3) Work related to resource mobilisation has been relocated to yet another division. (See previous article in this issue.)

The most important change is that the interaction between CSOs and the Secretariat at the country level will now be through the FPMs, focusing more on issues related to grant management.

The numbers of FPMs has been increased, and so has the support provided to them by the country teams. The Secretariat's thinking is that having more FPMs will enable them to do more work, and to take on new responsibilities, including spending more time in-country and following up more consistently than they were able to do before. We will have to wait and see if this works.

The CS Team may not have been perfect, but its work was commendable. I think it will be difficult for FPMs to do this work as effectively. The CS Team was perceived very differently from FPMs. For instance, the Team was considered the key advocate for CS within the Secretariat. It was also seen as a useful entry point into the Secretariat and a useful source of information on the Fund, especially at regional meetings. FPMs, on the other hand, are seen as functionaries rather than advocates. A lot of effort will be needed to change this perception.

The CS Team was perceived as accessible and reliable in creating informal communication and consultative channels beyond what existed within CCMs. It was also regarded as an important channel for enhancing engagement of different non-state groups, including those in the private sector. This engagement involved grant-related processes linked to governance, oversight and grant implementation. FPMs are viewed as inaccessible because they prefer dealing directly with CCM heads and CCM secretariats.

The CS Team provided guidance to CCM members and civil society on grant management and oversight at regional meetings and sometimes in individual countries. The FPMs mainly provided guidance to principal recipients (PRs), and that guidance focused mainly on correcting mistakes.

The CS Team helped reach out to CSOs who were not engaged in the Global Fund by highlighting the opportunities available to them, a task that FPMs seem not particularly suited for. The Team also advocated for other roles CSOs could play, for instance in resource mobilisation. This will now be handled by the Resource Mobilisation Division.

The CS Team also helped support technical assistance (TA) providers such as the Civil Society Action Team (CSAT) and technical support facilities (TSFs) in various ways, including advising them about what was most relevant to CSOs in every round of funding. This helped streamline and focus TA provision to civil society. The CS Team was seen as a key source of information to help civil society advocate for the integration of community systems strengthening (CSS) and related activities in CCM proposals.

Under the new structure, provision has been made for one senior CSS specialist in the Strategy, Investment and Impact Division. This may seem to provide a focus on CSS, but I fear that this one individual will have too much work and that his or her efforts to advocate effectively for CSS will not be able to permeate down to the country level.

I also fear that if FPMs are made responsible to reach out to CSOs, they will only go as far as CSOs that are members of the CCM, and will leave others out. This is because they can't possibly do much more without disrupting their key grant management functions. (The CS Team was reaching out much wider than that.) I am left wondering what strategies will be put in place to ensure that the scope of the FPMs is not limited in this manner.

I have been a member of a CCM and have witnessed the dynamics between many CCMs and their FPMs. I think there is a lot of room for improvement. For instance, FPMs visiting a country are rarely seen by anyone other than the CCM secretariat, the CCM Chair and a few technical partners. Other CCM members are, more often than not, unaware of the visit.

I acknowledge that for the FPMs' primary role to succeed, the FPMs need to remain focused on the issues directly affecting the performance of grants. It seems likely, therefore, that some broader issues, such as relationship management and partnership development, may fall by the wayside.

Dealing with CSOs is not easy and many FPMs may find it simpler to deal with governments and multilateral and bilateral partners. Handling CSOs takes multiple consultative sessions. It can be tedious, and it involves dealing with many competing interests. However, the involvement of CSOs is critical to strengthening country systems and, thus, ensuring long-term sustainability of programmes to fight the diseases.

I also fear that because the experience of FPMs is primarily related to grant management, many FPMs lack an in-depth understanding of CS and the peculiarities of each region or country. Hopefully, FPMs will build up this expertise in time through interacting with these different situations, but what happens in the meantime?

The changes in dealing with CS, especially when combined with the downsizing of the CCM Team in the Secretariat, are likely to result in a weaker focus on country-level partnerships. The restructuring may also lead to fewer channels for local partners to vent, voice fears, share, learn and consult.

The Secretariat has indicated that technical partners such as UNAIDS have scaled up their resources and have shown a strong willingness to support the Global Fund at the country level. However, the coordination required for this to succeed is likely to take time. In the meantime, this delay will probably affect the level of support given to civil society, limiting the sustained engagement of CSOs with Global Fund systems in countries.

Critical components of the Global Fund model are the partnerships and relationships between state and non-state actors. These partnerships, both formal and informal, support effective implementation of grants. There is nothing fluffy about this. Therefore, the Global Fund should, and hopefully will, remain committed to ensuring sustained civil society participation, especially at the country level.

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