



Independent observer
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A deep dive into Global Fund language: Trying to make sense of the impenetrable and incomprehensible

Language can be a barrier. Look at what the [African Constituency Bureau](#) has had to say:

“Languages need to be taken into account in communication in both written documentation and in oral interactions during the various forums such as Board and Committee meetings, the Partnership Forum and in other convergences.

This would ensure a better understanding of the issues at stake as well as greater, more meaningful, interactions and engagements leading to innovations, especially from the continent in which the Global Fund invests the largest part of its resources.”

“More specifically, communication challenges can have a negative impact on grant implementation and on the performance of implementers due to poor understanding of Global Fund policies, procedures and guidelines on ethics and governance, programmatic and financial risk management, procurement and supply management of health products, etc.”

The Global Fund's public reports, published online, are well articulated and presented; and this article does not relate to them. However, over the past two years, Global Fund internal documents have become increasingly unconvincing and difficult to understand. There are several aspects to this. The first is that sentences are generally too long, often including unnecessary words and phrases that detract from the substance. This was highlighted by France's 'friendly' abstention from the voting at the Global Fund Board meeting earlier this month because they wanted to formally register their complaint about the complex and unintelligible English being used in the Board papers (Bravo, je suis tout à fait d'accord!).

Now, what do you understand by this:

Given the increasingly competitive and complex landscape and decreasing external support available for strategic advocacy-eco systems for the Global Fund and the three diseases, the uncertainty calls for a strategic deep-dive to determine the level of ambition for risk appetite and strategic approaches and levers for the differentiated mission-critical strategic communication strategies needed around all disease programs.

Not much? I am not surprised because it is typical of what readers/translators have to try and understand in Global Fund papers, reports, updates and presentations. As a reviewer, I have reached the point where I feel that it is time to speak up.

So many papers are full of phrases and language that detract from – rather than add to – the messages that are being delivered. Moreover, when educated English people struggle to understand some of the language in Global Fund documents, it must be even more difficult – if not impossible – for many non-native English speakers to understand. And how can these documents possibly be translated into other languages?

We do not have time and space to go through every document but here – at random – is an example taken from page 5 of the OPEX Evolution 2020-2022 Budget Ceiling Revision submitted to the Board for its meeting last May:

“At the end of 2019, health programs supported by the Global Fund partnership had saved 38 million lives and has contributed to reductions in HIV, TB and malaria deaths, as well as helped scale up treatment and prevention coverage for the three diseases and strengthen health and community systems. The Secretariat has continuously strived to meet an evolving context to better support countries and the people we serve. The Secretariat has leveraged robust financial planning discipline to activate cost efficiencies and optimization strategies to remain within the US\$ 900M 3-year envelope, while continuously investing in strategic capabilities, organizational maturity, and delivering financial performance.”

No: the typing and grammatical mistakes are not mine. The second sentence may sound grand but it adds nothing at all and would have been best omitted. Then, in the third sentence, the Secretariat goes on to leverage robust financial planning discipline. I am a highly experienced financial analyst and I cannot imagine how to ‘leverage’ a discipline, let alone financial planning discipline. Do you think the writer was trying to say: “The Secretariat applied financial discipline to achieve cost savings”? Having informed the reader that this leveraging has activated cost efficiencies, it tells us no more about what efficiencies were achieved and the values thereof. The discipline is also said to have activated ‘optimization strategies’. I have no idea what they are referring to. A discipline activating strategies? What were the optimization strategies? I have not found any previous references to them. The sentence should have ended at the word ‘envelope’; but no, the author was keen to convey more progress with the investments in ‘strategic capabilities’ and ‘organizational maturity’. If I were a Board member, I would want to know what strategic capabilities required continuous investment and why there was a need for continuous investment in organizational maturity, how much was invested in this, and with what outcomes.

On page 8 of the same paper, we are presented with another classic:

“Through thematic deep dives with MEC members, a detailed mapping of emerging priority themes for 2022 has been developed ahead of the annual budgeting/prioritization process. This provides a more granular view of prioritized initiatives by operational area and highlights likely trade-offs required in case the 3-year OPEX Budget cap for 2020-2022 is maintained.”

I have no idea what a ‘thematic deep dive’ is. At this point, it would have been helpful to list/explain the ‘emerging priority themes.’ The ‘detailed mapping’ is said to have provided ‘a more granular view’. What is that? And what are the ‘prioritized initiatives’?

Then there is the repeated use of inappropriate words. For example, in my article [Update on Health Finance: The future is more uncertain than ever](#) I noted that the update described everything as being ‘strategic’: approaches, applications, engagements, goals, objectives, directions, needs, partnerships, principles, opportunities, support, even recommendations. The word ‘strategic’ could – and should – have been omitted. Its repeated use, sometimes more than once in the same sentence, rendered it an irritating, unnecessary adjective. For future reference: (a) we can take for granted that the Global Fund does not have a list of non-strategic goals or objectives; and (b) principles, opportunities and recommendations can never be ‘strategic’. On occasion, where the discussion is referring to the level of importance – as might be the case with needs – then use an appropriate term such as ‘more important’ or ‘essential’.

I sense that the real problem is that the writers and presenters of some of the Global Fund documents find it easier to use pretentious-sounding language with throw-away words than make the effort to clearly express what they are trying to convey. If they were to pause to think what a ‘strategy’ actually is, they might stop the repeated use of ‘strategies’ and ‘strategic’, either by omission or by using more appropriate terminology. For those too lazy to consult a good dictionary, a ‘strategy’ is a way of/plan for achieving the desired end; it is not an end in itself.

Among other frequently misused words are: (i) “critical” – which refers to a factor that is the difference between life and death – but instead is used in place of ‘important’ or ‘necessary’ or ‘essential’ or is included when it adds nothing; and (ii) “leverage” – everything is leveraged: core and cross-cutting themes, digitalization, initiatives, partnerships, technology, you name it. And I cannot imagine how one goes about leveraging a theme.

You will see what I mean in the following text taken from the Report of the Technical Evaluation Reference Group submitted to the Board in May this year. The first two ‘key’ conclusions from the HIV primary prevention thematic review (we are not informed about the non-key conclusions) were:

“1. The Global Fund has increasingly been playing a critical stewardship role for HIV primary prevention at the global level. This has led to a number of significant achievements and improvements over the previous allocation period (NFM2), particularly with the introduction of some key initiatives by the Global Fund emphasizing HIV primary prevention, i.e., several types of catalytic investments.

2. There are critical barriers to achieving better impact on HIV incidence relating to country-level issues in terms of effective and quality design and implementation of programs.”

The word ‘important’ would have been a more appropriate adjective than the first time ‘critical’ was used. The second time ‘critical’ crept in, it was not needed at all. More important, however, is the lack of clarity. What exactly were these first two conclusions when: (a) the ‘significant achievement and improvements’ are not described/listed; and (b) ‘some key initiatives’ were introduced which are not clearly explained, only a hint by referring to ‘several types of catalytic investments’? What were these several types and how did they contribute to the achievements/improvements? What were the ‘critical barriers’? How can a design be effective? And the Board members, you, me and other readers need to understand the extent of

the country-level issues. Just how widespread are these ‘critical barriers’? We have here, then, an example of where, instead of convincing the reader, the poorly constructed text begs more questions.

Here is an example of a poorly constructed argument. It is taken from the recent Update on Mobilization and the Seventh Replenishment Action Plan (see my article [Update on Global Fund resource mobilization and the Seventh Replenishment action plan](#)) which, under the action plan for the seventh replenishment, states:

“Our priorities for launching a successful campaign and resource mobilization effort include: (a) ... (b) ... (c) Mobilizing support through a dynamic, creative and robust replenishment communications campaign that builds on the brand refresh and 20th Anniversary campaign while also highlighting key thematic priorities and is supported by differentiated communications strategies across prioritized donor markets from now to Q3 2022.’

Sounds grand? Probably; but what is it saying? First, it lists eight priorities, (a) to (h). We are left unsure about the priorities that are not included in the list. If there are only eight priorities, then the author(s) should have used the word ‘are’ and not ‘include’. Then, the description of priority (c) mixes two separate subject matters: (i) the basis of the design of the campaign; and (ii) how it will be implemented. We are informed that the campaign will also be ‘highlighting key thematic priorities’, suggesting that there are key and non-key priorities and thematic and non-thematic priorities (although I do not understand what ‘thematic’ is referring to). The ‘differentiated communications strategies across prioritized donor markets’ sound very interesting but neither the ‘differentiated communications strategies’ nor the ‘prioritized donor markets’ are explained.

Then comes a real winner in the confusion stakes: priority (h), which I omitted from my article on the paper as I could not understand it:

“Further strengthening and growing the Global Fund’s advocacy eco-system in the context of an increasingly competitive and complex landscape and decreasing external support available for advocacy for the Global Fund and the three diseases.”

I have no idea what an ‘advocacy eco-system’ is; and if I, an experienced consultant, reviewer, writer and editor do not understand it, how can it be translated into other languages? Where does this ‘eco-system’ need strengthening? How is this system to be grown? (I have heard of ‘developing’, ‘expanding’ and ‘implementing’ a system but never ‘growing’ a system.) The ‘decreasing external support available for advocacy’ is an important reference. Is it decreasing already? By how much? Is it expected to continue to decrease? It appears that the intention is to increase advocacy efforts despite an expected decline in support for this activity. I could not assume this to be the case, so I omitted (h) from the list in my article.

The Global Fund has developed its own language which must evidently sound ‘dynamic, creative and robust’ as well as grandiose. Unfortunately, too often statements raise more unanswered questions. Take this example from the Office of the Inspector General Operational Progress Report:

“Defining clear strategic approaches for Domestic Financing for Health: While developing a new Global Fund strategic vision, ambition and high-level approach has been crucial to progress, there is a need to bridge the gap between the high-level ambition and Secretariat operations, and ensure technical support is aligned to strategic needs.”

Note that the heading is about ‘Defining clear strategic approaches.’ But we are then told that the Global Fund has already developed a ‘new ... strategic vision, ambition and high-level approach’ which has been ‘crucial to progress’. What progress is this referring to? So what are the DFH approaches that need to be defined? What exactly is the ‘gap between high-level ambition and Secretariat operations’? What

‘technical support’ is required; and where is it not aligned with ‘strategic needs’? Notice again: (a) how the grand-sounding language invites more questions; and (b) the persistent use of the adjective ‘strategic’. It looks like everyone in the Global fund is infected with a strategic word disease.

Now, get ready for the deep dive. Yes, because deep diving is one of the Global Fund Secretariat’s most frequent activities. They are all at it. I had not realized that Geneva is a centre for deep diving. Personally, I find the ‘deep diving’ confusing. I am not a diver but I do know from friends who are experienced in the activity that it can be dangerous and it is inadvisable to go deep diving without specialist equipment and backup. Even then, there are limits. So where exactly does the Fund go diving and how deep? This is never made clear. However, the most unsatisfactory aspect of the use of this term is that the Secretariat, OIG or whoever goes deep diving does not report on what they saw or what they found. So, what was the point of the diving? A good example was the OIG March update on DFH in which a slide showed deep diving in eight countries. I am familiar with most of those countries (and I am sure that one would best avoid diving in most of them) and remain interested to know what was seen and/or found. But, so far, nothing. Please, fellows, drop this term. It sounds like nonsense when translated into other languages. If you mean that you are going to undertake – or have undertaken – in-depth research and analysis, then say so and provide the results; and leave diving to divers.

In June the Global Fund launched its ‘brand refresh’ to ‘leverage its impact record and diverse stakeholder-base’ with the aim of positioning the organization for success in a rapidly changing world. Now I would like the Global Fund to launch a plain English policy, whereby words are used properly, repetition is avoided, sentences are shorter, and the average person can read and understand the organization’s reports. It would also facilitate translation into other languages.

Further reading:

[The Global Fund: A Resemblance of the Tower of Babel – African Constituency Bureau](#)

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