



Independent observer
of the Global Fund

Transparency is a founding principle of the Global Fund: so where is it?

On 13 July 2022, a leading international aid transparency index published its latest index which includes the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria in the 'Good' category. Publish What You Fund's [2022 Aid Transparency Index](#), currently the only independent measure on aid transparency, reports that the Global Fund continues to perform best in the finance and budgets component, but the organization dropped points in programmatic components over the past two years. The latest report gives several recommendations on how the Global Fund can improve.

In [reporting on the ranking on its website](#), the Global Fund said that the Global Fund partnership is committed to aid transparency as one of its founding principles. It says it has made significant efforts to continually improve both the quality, quantity and timeliness of what it reports. In 2022, the Global Fund says it is taking steps to increase the availability of programmatic data and provide more detail on country summaries through its digital platforms. The Global Fund says it will continue to address concerns highlighted as part of the latest index.

Let us indeed hope that the Global Fund pays serious attention to this. Because we feel – and have said so several times – that the Global Fund is now much less open concerning various issues than it used to be.

Our article on Global Fund transparency starts by looking the Global Fund Board Retreat held on 8 July, one of a series of additional meetings in response to calls for more engagement to get through the year's heavy work agenda: we then go on to say that, while there may be a valid need for more meetings, surely more honesty and transparency should come first?

Board Retreat

It is a tough gig at the best of times being a member of one of the three Committee – Audit & Finance (AFC), Ethics & Governance (EGC), Strategy Committee (SC) – or the Global Fund Board.

On the whole, members are extremely assiduous. On top of their paid ‘day’ job, they have to work hard for no financial recompense, only the spiritual one of contributing to the ‘common good’. They must contend with a plethora of documents in Global Fundspeak. Many do not have either English or French as their mother tongue which makes it even more daunting dealing with concepts that do not translate easily – think “catalytic effect”! And they have to sit through a lot of meetings, either virtually, in person or hybrid, in languages which many of them do not speak well. No wonder it is so hard to involve grassroots activists.

The various Constituencies are conscientious about ploughing through the background papers and providing their written comments on issues which are sometimes poorly described (McKinsey (or McKinsey-type) slide decks in a mixture of management consultant and Fundspeak language, and acronym hell) and hard to get one’s head around. And yet, they do so rigorously; and rightly so, given the financial implications of their work.

This year, 2022, is especially demanding. Firstly, and most importantly, it is a replenishment year which happens to coincide with discussions on operationalising the new Strategy to start in 2023. Moreover, the new funding cycle materials are about to be launched to kickstart the process of applications for the 2024-2026 grant cycle; and the funding request templates and instructions are very different from previous rounds (we might have guessed...). They even include sections on issues such as PSEAH (the Prevention of Sexual Exploitation, Abuse and Harassment) – a topic that has been very new to many Committee/Board members so goodness knows what Country Coordinating Mechanism (CCM) members and other national stakeholders will make of it, let alone whether they will be able to adequately reflect it in their funding applications.

As if this wasn’t enough, we’ve had controversy surrounding the new Allocation Methodology, Qualitative Adjustments, and Catalytic Investments, to name but a few, and additional work caused by having to report back on the extra funding stream that is the COVID-19 Response Mechanism (C19RM).

Meanwhile, the two big elephants in the room are the twin ‘evils’ of Pandemic Preparedness and Response (PPR), and Resilient and Sustainable Systems for Health (RSSH) where, in spite of all the many consultations, there is still no clear way forward on what these will look like operationally under a new Strategy that has not one but ten (TEN!!) Theories of Change (which the Secretariat tries to downplay by calling them “mini” Theories of Change!) and associated ‘levers’. In spite of this gearbox, however, the car has still not left the garage while we’re grappling with trying not to stall the gears and actually drive the thing onto the road (and measure its performance, of course).

To top it all, the Committees have changed their leadership in a year when institutional memory might’ve been a good thing to hold on to.

Given all this, it is hardly surprising that at the 47th Board meeting, members expressed support for additional discussions on Strategy implementation as we move towards the Seventh Replenishment and the launch of the next cycle of grants.

What’s coming up?

At May’s Board meeting, members recognised that there was A LOT to deal with this year. So the Board agreed to engage further on the following issues:

- Strategy delivery, through continuing discussions within an overall program to mobilise the Board over the coming months. This will include detailed discussions in key thematic areas as agreed at the May Board meeting (PPR, CCMs, Communities, Health Financing, Gender, and Next Generation Market Shaping).
- M&E and key performance indicator (KPI) Frameworks: There will be widespread and early engagement with the Board on these, including in July 2022 alongside AFC and SC discussions. There will be a focus, among other issues, on key priorities across the three diseases, RSSH, and Community, Rights, and Gender (CRG), as well as how best to “communicate transparent, routine performance and results data” (see our thoughts on this later in this article).
- Priority agenda setting with new Committee Leadership to ensure effective decision- making and oversight on topics for Strategy delivery.
- The role of partners: There will be comprehensive discussion at Board level, including on their complimentary role in delivering specific priorities, accountabilities and evolution of the global health architecture.
- OpEx budget: At the November 2022 meeting, the Board will discuss and approve the including priorities and implications for Strategy implementation. The Secretariat will also present a much-needed fuller narrative and overview of how all these elements of implementation come together.

The Board Leadership and the Secretariat, with input from the Coordinating Group, thought about how to address these requests, as well as the need to allow adequate time and space for discussion of these important and complex topics. They have proposed a detailed agenda for the coming months, combining the elements of: (i) standalone engagements with the Board while also leveraging the planned meetings on the above-mentioned priorities; (ii) country level consultations; (ii) meetings for the Committees and the Board up to and including November; and (iv) upholding Committees’ roles and leveraging their work in support of Board discussion.

The document GF/BR2022/01 Concept Note and Indicative Agenda for the Board Retreat will soon (hopefully) be available on the Global Fund website and contains full details of the proposed programme between now and November.

Board Retreat 8 July

In the meantime, this article focuses largely on the Board Retreat held on 8 July 2022, following the Committee meetings on 6-7 July. The Retreat agenda covered the following:

- An overview addressing timelines and upcoming matters coming to the governance bodies.
- In-depth thematic discussions on Health Financing, and PPR, allowing the Board to discuss the current health financing landscape and global health architecture, framed within the context for Strategy delivery.
- Discussion on the M&E and KPI frameworks, building on the July Committee sessions and providing space for important Board engagement ahead of decision- making at its November meeting.
- Small group discussions on CCMs, Communities and Gender, intended to shape future Committee and Board discussions on these topics.

We bring you more in-depth discussion of these topics in Article 4 on [M&E and the KPI Framework](#), and Article 5 on [More questions than answers: stakeholders are anxious to clarify plans to implement the new Global Fund Strategy](#).

Meanwhile, on the issues of 'transparency and accountability'...

Just a final salvo for the Secretariat and Board to consider: if the Global Fund really wants to know how "best to communicate transparent, routine performance and results data" it is so obvious to the rest of us: go back to the practice, back in the day, of putting ALL the grant information on the dashboard, as well as timely and comprehensive circulation of ALL Committee and Board background papers to all interested parties.

We did a bit of investigation to see exactly what can be accessed compared to several years ago.

In the good old days, you used to be able to look up any country and immediately find its funding requests/concept notes/grant applications and supporting documents such as the Grant Performance Reports, Management Letters, Agreed Management Actions, drawdown and absorption rates, etc. Not so nowadays. Purists among you may argue that this information can be found somewhere in the datasets. Well, maybe some might be but boy! you have to work hard for the privilege. And it is selective. So, for example, some of the Funding Request documents (submitted and reviewed by the Technical Review Panel) are indeed available (i.e., narrative form, Performance Framework, financial landscape tables, programmatic and financial gap tables) but not the work plan nor the detailed or even summary budget, nor the Grant Performance Reports or Management Letters.

Even more frustrating, we couldn't find any Framework Agreements (which previously used to be called "Grant Agreements") signed between the Global Fund and the Principal Recipients (and the CCM) for each grant; and which included a summary budget in the Annex (by cost category, by intervention area, by implementer). In fact, you cannot even see the grant performance reports any more.

And the data are often not up to date. We refer to the multicountry grant information as a good example of this.

And what is the secrecy surrounding the Committees' background papers? These are never published in spite of many requests from Aidspace and others to do so. Why the mystery? And why do Board papers take so long to make their way onto the website when in reality they could go up even before or during the actual meeting? For example, at the time of writing the 8 July Board retreat papers are still not yet available, more than a week later.

What aren't we supposed to know until well after the actual meetings themselves?

But finally, and the most important issue, is the fact that the Global Fund is putting the Constituencies in an awkward and uncomfortable position. Constituencies' representatives are supposed to consult their stakeholders for feedback, but how are Constituency members meant to review and comment on documents which are embargoed for external circulation and are indicated for internal use only? The same applies to Aidspace. We are the official independent watchdog of the Global Fund but we receive no documents from the Secretariat with the exception of the Board papers in our capacity as Board observers. We can only perform our mandate to bring you, our readers, comments on Global Fund Committee papers and Constituency statements if others who do receive them are willing to risk sharing them with us. How transparent is that?!

We all know the expression, 'people in glass houses shouldn't throw stones.' Dear Global Fund, while we appreciate all you do, please lead by example when it comes to transparency and accountability! And do so in a clear and simple language that does not require the reader to have an advanced degree in

Fundspeak.

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