



Independent observer
of the Global Fund

FROM AN ACORN GREW AN OAK TREE

This article chronicles the humble beginnings of Aidspan in its first few years of existence. It does so by providing a timeline of some key events in Aidspan's life that contributed to its growth and have resulted in the organization it is today. Aidspan's founder shares his motivation for doing so ? and many other things ? in Article 4, an interview with Bernard Rivers.

Setting the scene

It will be remembered that in April 2001 Kofi Annan mooted the idea of the Global Fund at the [African Summit on HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis and Other Infectious Diseases](#) in Nigeria. We all know what happened next. So, this is the story of how one small idea to support the work of the Global Fund and hold it accountable to its stakeholders grew into the organization that is Aidspan today.

15 October 2001: The Break-the-Silence (BTS) listserv, managed by Tim France, the founder of the [Health & Development Networks](#) (HDN), was (re)launched with the specific aim of supporting open and transparent communication around the establishment of what became the Global Fund.

12 November 2001: Bernard Rivers started making detailed posts to BTS in which he shared information and thoughts about the Global Fund.

8 December 2001: Bernard wrote a paper 'Risk and Opportunity Factors for the Global Fund During its First Year of Operation', and sent it to various interested parties. (N.B. from Arlette: I have a soft copy of this and can send it to anyone who is interested.)

13-14 December 2001: Bernard went to Brussels to, in his words, 'hang around with a few other activists', outside the third meeting of the Transitional Working Group, the entity that had been charged with setting

up the Global Fund.

1 January 2002: The Global Fund started work.

5 April 2002: Bernard, Tim France and Gorik Ooms, who had 'met' through BTS, started exchanging ideas on how to analyse which countries 'should' give how much to the Global Fund.

21 April 2002: Bernard, Tim and Gorik wrote an article entitled 'The Global Fund: Which Countries Owe How Much?' and distributed it to 20,000 AIDS professionals, government officials, journalists, and activists around the world. This paper described their formula, the 'Equitable Contributions Framework' (reproduced in Article 3 in this issue).

In that paper, Bernard was described as 'head of Aidspan, a new non-governmental organization providing fundraising assistance to developing-country AIDS projects, based in New York, USA'. This was the first public mention of Aidspan.

11 June 2002: Bernard launched the Aidspan website at www.aidspan.org. It described Aidspan as a non-government organization (NGO) established to provide fundraising assistance to NGOs working on the causes and consequence of global AIDS.

6 November 2002: Aidspan was legally incorporated to, among other things, 'provide information and a discussion forum regarding the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria and its activities'. This was the first time that the Global Fund was explicitly mentioned in Aidspan's mission.

6 December 2002: Aidspan established an Editorial Advisory Board for Aidspan's soon-to-be-announced Global Fund Observer (GFO). It comprised the International Council of AIDS Service Organizations ([ICASO](#)), the Global Network of People Living with HIV ([GNP+](#)), the Latin American Network of People with HIV (REDLA+), HDN and the International HIV/AIDS Alliance (known as [Frontline AIDS](#) since 2019). The first three of these had been designated as Communications Focal Points within the Global Fund's NGO board delegation. The Editorial Advisory Board was originally set up to ensure that the GFO did work that was respected and endorsed by those institutions. However, by mid-2003 the Editorial Board was no longer needed, as the GFO had become accepted and validated, and GFO articles no longer needed to be 'checked' for accuracy and political correctness. However, Aidspan continued to maintain strong links with those organizations and people and to this very day is collaborating with such organizations on various projects.

18 December 2002: 30,000 people who had previously attended one of the International AIDS Conferences were sent an email announcing that the GFO was about to be launched, and were invited to subscribe. They were told that the GFO would provide 'an independent platform for news, analysis and commentary about the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria'.

23 December 2002: The first issue of GFO was sent out. (All issues of GFO are accessible at <http://www.aidspan.org/en/c/gfo-issues>). That issue described GFO as 'an independent source of news, analysis and commentary about the Global Fund', adding that 'Aidspan is a US-based non-profit organization that promotes increased support for, and effectiveness of, the Global Fund'. Over 1,000 people had signed up for the Newsletter within 24 hours of its being announced on 18 December, with many more since (and 15,000 to date).

That first GFO issue, with Bernard as both the Aidspan Executive Director and GFO Editor, contained some background information about the Global Fund for what he called 'enthusiasts' to digest during the holiday season. Issue 2 would follow a more standard format, with News, Analysis, and Commentary. At that time, the aim was to publish the GFO approximately every two weeks, and also to publish an issue before the Global Fund Committees' and Board meetings, and then to publish again immediately after

these meetings to inform readers of the events that took place and the decisions reached.

To this day the GFO has kept to that format, with News, Analysis, and Commentary interspersed with Interviews and Of Interest; and the special issues to coincide with Committees' and Board deliberations.

16 January 2003: Aidspan's Board (different from the Editorial Advisory Board) held its first meeting.

30 January 2003: Impressed by the first five issues of GFO, the [Open Society Foundations](#), at that time known as the Open Society Institute (OSI), sent an unsolicited email to Aidspan suggesting that OSI might provide it with funding. After a preliminary meeting, Aidspan sent OSI its first formal proposal on 23 February 2003.

This described Aidspan as a US-based non-profit organization that promotes increased support for, and effectiveness of, the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. Aidspan's primary vehicle for this is the Global Fund Observer, a widely distributed and authoritative email-based newsletter that provides an independent platform for news, analysis, and commentary about the Global Fund. The proposal also noted that Aidspan does other work, much of it behind the scenes, regarding the Fund.

At that time, Aidspan was staffed solely by Bernard, who had personally funded all of its activities prior to January 2003. Aidspan's proposal also noted that the organization had a strong and effective board and that the GFO is guided by an Editorial Advisory Board composed of five of the world's leading AIDS-related NGOs. The proposal also noted that Aidspan seeks to perform the following tasks: (i) to inform potential supporters of the Global Fund about the Fund's activities and needs; (ii) to provide developing-country governments and organizations with information about the Fund and its grants, in order to improve the chances that they will submit high-quality applications to the Fund; (iii) to work publicly and behind the scenes in ways that enhance the chances that the Fund will raise sufficient money; and (iv) to serve as an independent watchdog of and commentator on the Fund's activities. The proposal said that Aidspan unwaveringly supports the principles upon which the Global Fund was founded but that, however, Aidspan is prepared, on occasion, to constructively point out ways in which it believes the Fund is not acting according to those principles. OSI went on to fund Aidspan for several years and was its first donor.

April-June 2003: Bernard made three visits to China to help the China Country Coordinating Mechanism (CCM) better understand the Global Fund and to help it develop a more effective approach to creating applications to the Global Fund. (China had been rejected in its Round 1 and Round 2 applications; subsequent to Bernard's input, China was successful in its Round 3 application.)

11 January 2004: Aidspan published its first Guide – The Aidspan Guide to Obtaining Global Fund-Related Technical Assistance.

7 March 2004: Aidspan published the first Guide co-authored by David Garmaise: The Aidspan Guide to Applying to the Global Fund (Round 4). Many of you will remember David Garmaise and his long association with the GFO before his untimely death in 2018.

August 2004: Bernard went to Nigeria to help the CCM come up with improvements in how it functioned, and to recommend what needed to be done to get its troubled Global Fund grants back on track.

Aidspan's mission and vision over the years:

As of July 2021, the Aidspan website states that Aidspan is 'An international non-governmental organization (NGO) created in 2002 as an independent observer of the global fund to fight AIDS, TB, and Malaria. Aidspan provides Global Fund stakeholders with information and analysis to understand and evaluate Global Fund progress. Aidspan aims to influence the transparency and effectiveness of the Global Fund at the global and country level'. It goes on to add that Aidspan's mission is a world without

the epidemics of HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, and malaria. In essence, then, although the mission of Aidspace may be stated differently to that of the beginning of its existence, Aidspace still maintains the same focus and intent.

Aidspace has indeed grown, from an organization of one New York-based activist and his vision to one of eleven staff with headquarters in Kenya, rightly so given that 70% of Global Fund resources go to this region. Aidspace's international staff come from England, France, Kenya, Rwanda, and Uganda, and all but two of them are from Africa.

The GFO is now also published monthly in French, L'Observateur du Fonds Mondial, with its own Editor.

Nonetheless, the ethos and direction of Aidspace and GFO remain the same: to remain true to the ideologies on which the Global Fund was founded and constant to its many partners and stakeholders, especially those affected by the three diseases. Indeed, Aidspace's original sphere of interest, HIV/AIDS, has been expanded to include TB, malaria and, since 2020, the current pandemic of COVID-19. Aidspace remains a strong supporter of the Global Fund, upholding its values, reporting on what is working well but also taking the Fund to task when needed.

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