



Independent observer
of the Global Fund

AN INTERVIEW WITH THE FOUNDER OF AIDSPAN

Introduction

Bernard Rivers is a retired economist with dual UK-US nationality. He was raised in the UK, where he earned a degree in mathematics and economics from Cambridge University. Since 1978 he has been based in the USA, except for a ten-year stint in Kenya. Prior to founding Aidspan, Bernard's career was diverse but always grounded in data analysis and political and social activism.

In this interview, Bernard chatted with me about what he laughingly calls his “chequered career”, and about how it was that he created Aidspan and the Global Fund Observer.

Bernard, early on in your career you moved into investigative journalism in the UK. What kind of things were you investigating?

I graduated from university in 1969 in the midst of the rising civil rights movements, protests against the Vietnam war, and a general counterculture attitude among the young. This backdrop has always had an influence on my choices in life.

Over the next four years, during the day I was an economic planner for British Airways and during the night I was an activist, primarily regarding the 1971 civil war in the country that became Bangladesh.

I did well at British Airways, but for me, this was not a lifelong vocation. So in 1973, I resigned to become a freelance investigative journalist. I was especially interested in Western corporate activity in Africa – my gap year had been spent in Nigeria.

At that time, the United Nations policy of trade sanctions against Rhodesia's illegal white government was

in full force; yet, although Rhodesia was a landlocked country, it was still managing to obtain all the oil it needed – nobody knew how. After four years of research, a colleague and I were finally able to prove, through in a series of articles in the London Sunday Times, that Shell, British Petroleum, and two other oil companies were secretly providing the oil through a chain of intermediaries. As a result of our exposé, we and a Sunday Times staffer were jointly named Journalist of the Year in the British Press Awards.

I then went on to research how oil reached apartheid South Africa, combining my activism with my economic and analytical skills.

How did you move from this to software development? It seems quite a stretch ? !

I had become tired of being an impoverished activist (not least because I was now married with children), and I had become excited about computers, which I had learned to program while analyzing all my oil data.

At that time, small companies and non-profit organizations had just started to use computers. I found a niche in the market: I realized that big foundations supporting non-profit organizations needed help with tracking their data regarding proposals received and grants approved. So I wrote a program called The Grants Manager and set up Riverside Software, Inc. in New York, which I ran from 1990 to 1996. In the end, the company had 15 staff and its software was used by over 650 US and UK foundations.

I categorize this period of my life as being like jumping into a swimming pool and not knowing how to swim (i.e., how to run a company). So I “taught myself to swim”. But then I found there were sharks in the water (i.e., competitors). Life went from being fun to being not so much fun. So in 1996, I sold Riverside Software to Blackbaud, the leading provider of fundraising software to NGOs. I then worked for Blackbaud as a senior executive. But it wasn’t a good fit for me. I had forgotten what it was like to have a boss!

And how did the idea for Aidspan come about?

Well, I had just turned fifty. I contemplated retiring early, but I knew that would make me miserable. So I gave myself two years of self-funded time to find something to do that I liked and that could make a difference.

In particular, I wondered if there was any way in which I could combine my previous experiences in planning, activism, journalism, Africa, grant-making, data, computers and being my own boss – clearly, a bizarre and crazy objective! My interest in Africa had recently been heightened because AIDS in Africa was becoming so serious. So: could I use my skills in relation to AIDS in Africa?

In 2001, a service called Break the Silence (BTS) was set up to enable thousands of people interested in AIDS in developing countries to share emails with each other via what was then known as a listserv, and I started following the discussion. Activists, together with sympathetic voices in many governments, were saying that the world’s wealthy countries had to come up with billions of dollars to address AIDS, but it was unclear how this could be done.

At this time, Kofi Annan, the then Secretary-General of the UN, promoted the idea of there being one joint organization, rather than multiple bilateral agencies, through which funding could be channelled. Remarkably, he said that this new organization should not be part of the UN, because it should be controlled not just by governments but also by representatives of the NGO and corporate sectors. This concept was actively discussed during the rest of 2001.

Arising from all this, the Global Fund was set up at the start of 2002, and its estimated annual needs were \$2 to 3 billion. Through BTS, I met Tim France and Gorik Ooms, activist development professionals based in Thailand and Mozambique. Together, we created what we called the ‘Equitable Contributions Framework’. This took the total amount of money that the Global Fund needed and carved it up according

to the economic wealth of the individual countries that we felt could and should “fund the Fund”. We published our paper in April 2002 and circulated it to 20,000 people around the world. (It’s reprinted here .)

At that time, I was still writing on the BTS listserv but I felt there should be a venue to provide more structured articles and feedback regarding Global Fund issues. So during the second half of 2002 I launched Aidspan and the Global Fund Observer (GFO). Within 24 hours of announcing its existence, GFO had 1,000 subscribers and within two weeks there were 2,000.

Tell me about those years with Aidspan and post-Aidspan

From 2002 to 2012 I ran [Aidspan](#). It started in New York with me as the only employee, but I moved it to Kenya in 2007. For the first year or so I was able to fund Aidspan with my own money. This meant that instead of saying to potential donors ‘I have a dream which might work’, I could say ‘I have a dream and I have proved it can work’. This was a more appealing pitch! And it won Aidspan its first donor, the Open Society Institute, who invited me to submit a proposal for funding. OSI gave us \$50,000 to start with. This paved the way for others. During Aidspan’s first 10 years I raised nearly \$10 million and my ‘calling card’ was the GFO as proof of relevance.

One key reason why the GFO was needed, at least during those early years, was that the Global Fund was never very good at explaining itself. The Fund used common but evasive terms like “resource mobilization” (I prefer the more honest “getting money”), its grant-applications forms practically needed a PhD to be understood, and it was rarely candid about its mistakes. As a result, many people who needed to deal with the Global Fund found the GFO, with its friendly, candid and straightforward articles, to be a lifeline.

Another thing that people liked about GFO is that it had a very strict separation between fact and opinion. The great majority of GFO articles were labeled “News”, and these never expressed any opinion at all. But from time to time we also ran an article labeled “Commentary”; these were always signed and were often quite opinionated.

After handing over the leadership of Aidspan to my successor in September 2012, I served until 2014 as a visiting fellow at Cambridge University and as a ‘Senior Fellow’ of Aidspan, which gave me the opportunity to publish a few more pieces about the Global Fund. Since then, my wife and I have had a delightful time doing all those things that retired grandparents so often do.

“While I ran Aidspan, Aidspan’s loyalties were not to the Global Fund as an organization, they were to the principles upon which the Fund was founded and to the people whom the Fund served. I had a deep desire for the Fund to live up to those principles. But if I ever felt that the Fund as an organization was clearly not living up to those principles or not doing its best for those people, I felt it was both appropriate and necessary for GFO to say so. For this reason, even though I often checked with the Fund regarding the factual accuracy of what GFO was planning to report, I never sought the approval for any forthcoming article. This point was made clear at the end of every issue of GFO, which said, “The Board and staff of the Global Fund have no influence on, and bear no responsibility for, the content of any other Aidspan publication”.

Bernard Rivers, former Aidspan Executive Director, on his vision regarding the independence of Aidspan and the Global Fund Observer

Note from Arlette:

As readers know, [Aidspan serves as an independent watchdog of the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, TB and Malaria](#)

. It seeks to monitor, explain and critique the Global Fund, with the objective of increasing the effectiveness of the Fund and of the implementers of its grants. Nowadays, Aidspace is best known for its GFO online newsletter, which has nearly 15,000 subscribers, mostly development professionals, stakeholders, beneficiaries of Global Fund grants, Global Fund staff and implementers, and thematic and technical donors and partners. Aidspace covers its million-dollar-plus annual budget through grants from foundations and governments. It does not accept Global Fund money, perform paid consulting work, or charge for any of its products.

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