Regional 'Platforms' proving vital to Global Fund's community, rights and gender strategic initiative

The Global Fund's Regional Platforms for Communication and Coordination have been humming along this year, achieving results through an impressive amount of work in the service of strengthening community engagement in Global Fund processes. As reported in GFO 326, the Platforms were re-launched in December 2017, as part of the Community, Rights and Gender Strategic Initiative (CRG SI). The CRG SI is a $15-million initiative which aims to strengthen meaningful engagement of communities in all Global Fund processes, including country dialogue, funding request development, grant-making, grant implementation and monitoring.

The Regional Platforms, which are one component of the CRG's strategic initiative, have four strategic objectives:

1. Further the meaningful engagement of civil society and community groups through regular bi-directional communication and provision of accurate information to enhance the knowledge and participation of these actors in Global Fund-related processes
2. Improve the overall impact of Global Fund programs and interventions, and disease responses more globally through strengthened engagement of civil society and communities affected by HIV, tuberculosis, and malaria
3. Expand access to technical assistance (TA) for civil society and community groups through greater coordination with the CRG Strategic Initiative short-term TA component, as well as key national, regional, and global technical assistance partners
4. Support strategic civil society and community capacity development initiatives through fostering

spaces for engagement and collective participation in key decision-making processes, in particular as they relate to community, rights, and gender

To an extent, the Global Fund counts on the Regional Platforms to ensure that communities are up to date on Global Fund news and opportunities. All Platform hosts are civil society organizations (CSOs) which already operate at a regional level in the HIV, TB, and malaria responses. (See Table 1 for details on Regional Platform hosts.)

Table 1: Regional Platform hosts

Region	Platform host
Anglophone Africa	Eastern Africa National Networks of AIDS Service Organizations (EANNASO) Arusha, Tanzania
Asia-Pacific	APCASO Bangkok, Thailand
Eastern Europe & Central Asia	Eurasian Harm Reduction Association (EHRA) Vilnius, Lithuania
Francophone Africa	Réseau Accès aux Médicaments Essentiels (RAME) Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso
Latin America & the Caribbean	Vía Libre Lima, Peru
Middle East & North Africa	International Treatment Preparedness Coalition-MENA (ITPC-MENA) Marrakech, Morocco

The CRG Strategic Initiative spans the 2017-2019 allocation period and was preceded by the CRG Special Initiative, which ran during the 2014-2016 period. The Strategic Initiative already seems to be producing at a higher level than its predecessor. Noah Metheny is the Community Engagement Lead for the CRG SI, and he credits an intentional process for the improvements. "Since the launch of the CRG Strategic Initiative, we had the opportunity to reflect on and incorporate the learning from the CRG Special Initiative," Mr. Metheny says, "from the way it is structured, implemented, monitored, and managed—to identify and achieve more impactful synergies. With this intentional, reflective and collaborative approach, we are better able to identify opportunities to align, leverage, and amplify the work happening across the three different components."

For the Regional Platforms and the CRG strategic initiative, synergy is key. The other two components of the CRG SI are short-term technical assistance for communities and CSOs, and long-term capacity building for global key population networks. There is an expectation that each of the components mutually reinforces the others.

As a form of kick-off to the Strategic Initiative, a "Learning Event" for all CRG SI partners was held in Bangkok in February 2018. The event brought together all the Regional Platforms and a selection of CRG TA providers and capacity building recipients, as well as some of the Fund's technical partners. According to Mr. Metheny, the February event "built upon organic collaborations already happening, from discussions between the Regional Platforms and the key population networks, to engagement of TA

providers in the Platforms' regional consultations, to working with networks to identify potential TA needs, among many other examples."

The International AIDS Conference (AIDS 2018) in July was the next collective event for the Platforms and CRG SI. The platforms collaboratively organized the "Global Fund Community Zone", a networking zone in the conference's "Global Village." (See GFO 339 for a dedicated article on the Networking Zone.) For Mr. Metheny, his main takeaway from the AIDS 2018 experience was that, "the work of the Regional Platforms (along with the other CRG SI partners) remains crucial and critical to the mission and impact of the Global Fund." He elaborated: "All of the sessions at the platform networking space reiterated the importance and impact of fostering meaningful participation and engagement of civil society and community groups across the three diseases. This was evidenced across such sessions as the launch of a new global TB network (TB People); to multiple sessions on technical assistance; to discussing substantive topics like sustainability and transition, adolescents, and human rights; to a joint town hall with Peter Sands."

Communication

Communication is a critical aspect of the Regional Platforms' work. This is also a major growth area for the platforms over the special initiative. Dr. Gemma Oberth is the Regional Platforms Coordinator for the CRG Department of the Global Fund, and she sees the Platforms' collective communications reach as a stand-out improvement. "Together, the six Platforms reach 11,987 subscribers with their email newsletters." That is a 56% increase over their reach less than a year ago. "As a result of this reach, the Platforms are able to provide regular and accurate Global Fund information to communities who might otherwise not have a mechanism to engage," said Dr. Oberth.

However, while the Platforms' newsletters are an important regular touchpoint with their regional audiences, they are only a small part of the communications work the platforms do. Each of the Platforms also maintains a social media presence, whether it be on Twitter, WhatsApp, or Facebook—where the Platforms have a collective 16,094 followers.

Regional meetings

One of the key means of engaging their audiences is convening regional meetings and workshops. Each Platform organizes at least one per year, and they may be more general or thematic in nature. In June the Eastern Europe and Central Asia (EECA) Platform held a workshop on sustainability and transition in Baku, Azerbaijan. The EECA region, much like Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), and Asia-Pacific regions, includes many countries that are confronting transition from Global Fund support. In these regions there is, "widespread concern about how to ensure the successful transition from Global Fund and other donor support to reliance on national funding," as the EECA Platform wrote in their recent program report to the Fund.

With their workshop, the EECA Platform aimed to improve civil society and community representatives' understanding of transition-related processes and how to meaningfully engage with them. The workshop brought together representatives from local NGOs, experts from different sectors involved in transition, the Azerbaijan Fund Portfolio Manager (FPM), and a human rights expert form the CRG team. The FPM, Olga Avdeeva, reflected on the meeting: "Indeed, this workshop was just what was needed in Azerbaijan in this particular time for all Azerbaijan NGOs and the whole Global Fund program in the country."

The Asia-Pacific Platform also organized a "Partners Meeting" in April in Bangkok. The meeting served to re-introduce the Platform and CRG SI, as well as facilitate dialogue on stigma in healthcare settings and, "the changing trends in drug policies in the region," according to Quentin Batréau, a program officer with Platform host organization APCASO. The Asia Pacific Platform, which dubs itself "APCRG," wrote about

the meeting on their [website](): "Throughout the two days, the meeting used a number of workshops and small groups to allow participants to have more intimate conversations around APCRG coordination and communication, stigma, and harm reduction. A list of suggested CRG information that partners expect from the APCRG, as well as proposed channels in ensuring that the information reach a wider audience were discussed and shared by the groups."

Content generation, research and translation

In addition to the online outreach and regional meetings, the Platforms also conduct research and generate original content for their audiences. The Anglophone Africa Platform combined these two methods for its Technical Assistance Effectiveness Reports. Based on the results of an online survey deployed throughout their geo-lingual region (countries in sub-Saharan Africa where English is the predominant European language) and several case studies, the Platform developed six in-depth analysis reports on what makes technical assistance work for communities in Botswana, Liberia, Sierra Leone, South Sudan, Swaziland, and Tanzania. (A summary report and each country report can be found [here]().)

Olive Mumba, Executive Director of the Platform host, Eastern Africa National Networks of AIDS Service Organizations (EANNASO), thinks that the reports represent some of the most consequential work the Platform has undertaken this year. "The reports provide highlights on experiences (achievements, challenges and recommendations) in technical support access and utilization by civil society and communities. The needs and response for technical [assistance] is context and process-specific. The reports show that civil society and communities require mid- to long-term TA, which should also support the sustainability of the organization rather than the short-term." The Platform presented the findings of the research at their regional meeting in Accra, Ghana, in April, and at other meetings and conferences since.

Finally, one of the important gaps filled by the Regional Platforms, for the Global Fund, is the translation of key materials into languages which not all Global Fund documents are available. The Fund tends to produce documents in English and French, and sometimes in Russian, Spanish, and Portuguese and other languages. But most of the Platforms have defined language accessibility as a key mandate of theirs. Each region has indigenous languages and common European languages that the Fund does not regularly service. Table 2 below describes some of the added language reach the Platforms are able to achieve on behalf of the Global Fund.

Table 2: Additional languages Regional Platforms have provided translation support for

Region	Additional languages
Anglophone Africa	Portuguese, Swahili
Asia-Pacific	Khmer, Sinhala, Thai, Urdu, Vietnamese
Eastern Europe & Central Asia	Russian
Latin America & the Caribbean	Spanish
Middle East & North Africa	Arabic

Coordination

The other primary function of the Regional Platforms is the coordination of technical assistance delivery in their respective regions. The Platforms themselves do not deliver TA, but rather support communities and CSOs to define their TA needs, identify potential providers, and develop and submit requests. The CRG TA Program is the main target for this activity, but other providers, such as the French 5% Initiative, GIZ (the German development agency), UNAIDS' Technical Support Mechanism, and others are also included.

The Platforms are tasked with creating demand for TA: helping communities define their TA needs and conceptualize their requests to providers. While the job sounds straightforward, it isn't always an easy undertaking. According to Dr. Oberth, the Platforms Coordinator, it has been at times challenging not only to generate requests for TA, but to ensure alignment between what is requested and what is available. During the prior special initiative, there was limited achievement on this objective, partly because of limitations on which Global Fund processes were eligible for TA – at that time, only country dialogue, funding request development, and grant-making. But as Mr. Metheny described, "With the expansion of the provision of TA under the CRG SI across the whole grant life cycle [now including grant implementation], the regional platforms play a pivotal role in helping identifying TA needs and linking community groups to CRG (and other funders) to provide TA. The regional platforms are embracing this potential by developing innovative and creative strategies (including virtual and other online tools) to increase demand for TA." The Platforms' embrace of this new potential has produced results. According to Dr. Oberth: "By August 2018 Platform activities had directly linked communities in 37 countries and two multi-country approaches with Global Fund-related technical assistance."

Francophone Africa platform

For their part, the Francophone Africa Regional Platform is trying something new. In April, the Platform, which is hosted by Réseau Accès aux Médicaments Essentiels (RAME), launched "e-CAT," ("communauté électronique d'assistance technique," or "electronic community for technical assistance") an online social network of CSOs and TA providers, through which TA needs (from CSOs) and offers (from providers) can be shopped around until a match is found. Currently there are 32 CSOs from all over French-speaking Africa and 12 TA providers registered on the network. Interested CSOs or providers can sign up here.

The Francophone Africa platform has also been providing direct coordination support to civil society in Niger, one of several countries in the region categorized as a "challenging operating environment." With the Platform's support, Nigerien civil society representatives have set up a "community watch committee" that monitors Global Fund funding-request development and grant implementation, to ensure adequate community engagement and inclusion of sound community responses within Global Fund programs. A video produced by the Platform, which details the experience and outcomes to date can be viewed here.

Due largely to language and eligibility issues in their region, the MENA Platform has prioritized external TA opportunities. Most notably, the MENA Platform, which is hosted by International Treatment Preparedness Coalition-MENA (ITPC-MENA), has worked closely with several CSOs in the region to develop and submit strong TA requests to the French 5% Initiative. "Because the French 5% is very active in our region, as a Platform we have been able to support CSOs in Egypt, Tunisia, and one working at a regional level, to access in-depth TA opportunities," said Yahia Zaidi, the MENA Platform coordinator. "Without the support of the Platform, I fear that these vital CSOs would not have been able to access these TA opportunities." Abdelrazek Abu El Ela, program director at Al Shehab in Egypt, echoed Mr. Zaidi's point: "The support that ITPC-MENA provided to Al Shehab for developing the concept note and full-fledged proposal to the French 5% Initiative was significantly important to ensure the development of a high-quality proposal that meets the standards of the donor."

Latin America and Caribbean Regional Platform

The Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) Regional Platform used its June regional meeting as both a mechanism to communicate and to coordinate, something other Platforms have done as well. At the meeting, which was held in Lima, Peru, the Platform reintroduced itself and presented relevant Global Fund topics. But according to Anuar Luna Cadena, Technical Coordinator of the LAC Platform, the meeting, "also aimed at supporting [CRG SI TA providers] to better meet the TA needs of civil society".

Mr. Cadena also said that "the meeting was a space to facilitate a regional dialogue on strategies to deal with community concerns about the preparedness for transition, the UN High Level Meeting on tuberculosis, CARLAC (Regional Advisory Committee for regional grants of the Global Fund in LAC), and the decisions of the Global Fund Board during its most recent meeting in Macedonia." Thus, they endeavored to not only coordinate TA, but also to facilitate greater coordination among Global Fund stakeholders in the region. In particular, the meeting provided an opportunity to strengthen coordination in the Caribbean, which has at times been difficult.

One participant, Nadine Louis from Haiti, reflected: "I take time to express my joy for having the opportunity to participate in the LAC meeting organized by VIA Libre. It was an occasion for me to meet many people and actors that are working in the fields of HIV, TB, malaria and human rights. It was very productive for me and I learned many things regarding how civil society are actively involved in decision making in Latin America and the Caribbean."

The highlights discussed in this article represent only a small fraction of the activities undertaken by the Regional Platforms this year. Their work has been described as a crucial asset, not only to the CRG SI, but to the Global Fund's mission overall.

Kate Thompson, who heads the CRG department at the Global Fund, helped to put the work of the Platforms into perspective: "There is a great amount of learning, growth, and evolution in the collaboration happening across the CRG SI, including the regional platforms. The platforms are helping to amplify the catalytic nature of the work each CRG SI partner is implementing to ensure more meaningful participation of civil society and community groups. The platforms are constantly recalibrating their strategies to be more adaptive and responsive to new information and ever-changing contexts to ensure that communities not only have the most recent and relevant information but also to have their voices heard and represented in Global Fund-related processes."

Editor's note: The author of this article, Charlie Baran, serves as a consultant technical advisor to the MENA Regional Platform, hosted by ITPC-MENA.

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