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Global Fund Networking Zone at AIDS 2018 shines a spotlight on community engagement

The Global Fund's six regional Community, Rights and Gender (CRG) platforms came together at the 22nd International AIDS Conference (AIDS 2018) to host the Global Fund Community Zone in the Global Village. The networking zone provided space for AIDS 2018 participants in Amsterdam to connect with each of the regional platforms, learn about key areas of work under the Global Fund CRG Strategic Initiative, engage with community partners that receive support from the Global Fund and discuss issues relevant to civil society and community groups.

The Global Fund's six platforms cover Francophone Africa, Anglophone Africa, the Middle East and North Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, Asia and the Pacific, Eastern Europe and Central Asia. Their mandate is to support communities to access technical assistance and to engage in all aspects of the grant processes (see GFO [326](#)). One of the main objectives of the platform is to “further the meaningful engagement of civil society and communities in Global Fund processes through bi-directional communication and the provision of accurate and accessible information”.

In fact, the regional platforms have developed a large array of tools, guides and reports to support civil society and community engagement – many of which were on prominent display at the booth. For example, the Asia Pacific Hub created a one-page community guide on the Global Fund's Human Rights Complaint Mechanism, and the Anglophone Africa Platform launched reports from technical assistance effectiveness studies conducted in 5 countries.

Another aim of the space was to promote dialogue and discussion across countries and regions, and between key stakeholders such as technical assistance providers, Global Fund staff and board members, communities, and of course, the regional platforms. To this end, the Networking Zone hosted over a

dozen hour-long sessions over the course of the 5 days. They were held in a dynamic, informal format which for some, was a welcome break from the Power Point-heavy, complex information presented in the formal conference. For most of the sessions, participants and panelists sat side-by-side in a circle, passing the microphone.

Reflecting on regional platforms' achievements

The space also provided an opportunity to reflect on the achievements of the regional platforms and share lessons learned. For example, Cecilia Senoo, Executive Director of Hope for Future Generations (HFFG) described the impact of partnering with EANNASO (Regional Platform for Anglophone Africa) to host the CRG Anglophone Africa platform meeting in Accra, Ghana. Global Fund Country Team site visits now always include time to meet with civil society and and give them the opportunity to raise important concerns.

Networking Zone Session Themes

Each 60 minute session covered one thematic area of relevance to civil society and community groups. They included:

- Preliminary Results of Global Fund Human Rights Baseline Assessments in 20 Priority Countries
- Community Mobilization, Community Engagement and TB Advocacy ahead of the TB High-Level Meeting at the U.N. in September 2018
- Technical Assistance available from the Global Fund Community Rights and Gender department and other technical assistance providers
- Ensuring that no one is left behind in sustainability and training planning and processes
- Innovations in community engagement: beyond country dialogue
- Accessing technical assistance for gender assessments in tuberculosis and TB/HIV
- Strengthening community responses and systems through community monitoring in challenging operating environments
- Making the Global Fund work for Adolescent Girls and Young Women (AGYW)

Townhall with Peter Sands

Peter Sands, the Executive Director of the Global Fund, drew the largest crowd for a townhall meeting co-hosted by the regional platforms and the Global Fund Advocates Network (GFAN). In his remarks, he pointed to the critical role of the civil society and community groups. “You’re the most powerful voice in advocacy,” Sands said, “and you also play a huge role in the decision-making” – a message that was well-received by those in attendance.

On resource mobilization he said: “We have to be realistic about the scale of the challenge we face, not just with HIV, but TB and malaria”. “We need more money,” Sands said. “But we also need to rethink the way we target our activities”. Raising money, he said will depend on how well we execute programs and “squeezing” the most impact out of the funds we have raised. He talked about the need to accelerate the feedback loop on what is and is not working – given that the learning cycle for the global health sector is much slower than it should be. Mr. Sands was also emphatic that we have to raise the degree of urgency around the HIV crisis in young women and girls, which needed to be addressed by engaging men and tackling gender inequality.

[MICHEL: GF tweet to embed here]

In the discussion that followed Sands' remarks, participants raised a number of key issues. For example,

how can we increase absorptive capacity and ensure that countries are not returning funds to the Global Fund – particularly in light of the fact that civil society groups have been lamenting the insufficiency of resources to address the three epidemics.

As reported previously by Aidspace (see GFO [321](#)), many issues around absorptive capacity are created at the Secretariat level. For instance, the introduction of ‘conditions precedent’ and management actions. A ‘condition precedent’ is a measure to address a critical issue that impacts grant implementation but was not resolved by the time the grant agreement was signed. It is incorporated into the grant documentation and its conditions must be fulfilled before a specific action, often a disbursement, can take place.

A ‘management action’ is similar to a condition precedent but addresses an issue that is not deemed to be as critical. If a principal recipient (PR) fails to meet the conditions or actions, the Secretariat can delay disbursement, which can then stall grant implementation. Mr. Sands agreed that this was an important issue, particularly in Africa, and that the Global Fund needed to find strategies to address impediments to grant absorption.

Another issue was that no new regional grants for key populations are being funded in Africa for the 2017-19 allocation period and interventions for key populations are being folded into the country grants. Mr. Sands asserted that embedding key populations-related programming into country allocations with the addition of catalytic funding was better than supporting key populations’ programming in parallel to the country grant. This position was countered by an audience member who maintained that countries were reluctant to fund civil society to challenge and hold the government accountable. This was because key populations-focused grants’ activities include activities such as documenting human rights violations, strategic litigation and advocacy for legal reform and policy change – which would put civil society organizations directly at odds with their funders and vulnerable to being cut off.

Reflecting on the existence of the Global Fund Community Networking Zone, Noah Metheny, Community Engagement Lead in CRG department at the Global Fund (which funds the regional platforms) said, “The Global Fund continues to be committed to provide funding to have community engagement and voices. There is an ongoing need to hold spaces [such as the Global Fund Community Networking Zone] to energize and re-focus and share the work that communities are leading in the six regions to ensure that communities and constituencies are heard and advocated for”.

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