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SIX REGIONAL PLATFORMS FOR COMMUNICATION AND COORDINATION BEGIN WORK AS PART OF THE GLOBAL FUND'S CRG STRATEGIC INITIATIVE

The Global Fund first established six Regional Platforms for Communication and Coordination under the Community, Rights and Gender (CRG) Special Initiative, which ran from 2014 to 2016. As [reported](#) by Aidspan, in November 2016 the Board approved \$15 million in continued investments for the initiative, renaming it the Community, Rights and Gender Strategic Initiative (CRG-SI) for the period 2017-2019. This next phase of the CRG-SI will continue to be implemented through three components: the Short-Term Technical Assistance Program; the Regional Platforms for Communication and Coordination; and the Long-Term Capacity Development and Meaningful Engagement of Key and Vulnerable Populations.

The CRG Department recently hired a new Community Engagement Lead, Noah Metheny, to manage the Strategic Initiative. Metheny told Aidspan he “was excited to start this new position at the Fund to build on the successes and lessons learned under the Special Initiative to further align, leverage and synergize the work of the Strategic Initiative to ensure, increase and catalyze the meaningful engagement of communities.”

The platforms are hosted by civil society organizations (CSOs) in six geo-lingual regions (see table). All six platforms will contract with the Fund and begin implementing their work before the end of 2017, with their contracts running for 2.5 years.

Table: Regional platform hosts

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

The platforms were selected through an open and competitive application process in the second and third quarters of 2017, which resulted in five of the six selected platforms being hosted by the same organizations as previously. The EECA platform is the only one with a new host organization: the Eurasian Harm Reduction Association (EHRA). While the EHRA is a relatively new organization, many of its technical staff members were part of the consortium that managed that EECA platform under the CRG Special Initiative. The continuity of hosting should be an asset to each individual platform, and to the CRG-SI as a whole, according to several people familiar with the program.

The CRG team has been very busy over the past six months. In addition to re-bidding the platforms for the 2017-2019 period and onboarding Metheny, the department recently hired a new part-time consultant to coordinate the platforms: former GFO correspondent and advisor to the Anglophone Africa Platform under the Special Initiative, Dr. Gemma Oberth. Oberth reflected on her appointment, telling Aidspace: “It’s exciting, having worked directly with one of the platforms in the past, and now getting to step back and see the bigger picture of how all six of them can work together.” She said that her personal goal for the program is to help make the interactions between the regional platforms and the country teams within the Global Fund’s Grant Management Division (GMD) more routine.

“I want to support the platforms to engage more regularly with GMD,” Oberth said. “A core function of the platforms’ work is to help make the Global Fund’s country-level investments more effective through meaningful community engagement, so GMD buy-in is important.” Given that Oberth has served as the lead writer for a host of country and regional funding requests in recent years, she should be well-positioned to strengthen the CRG-GMD bond.

How the regional platforms work

The work of the regional platforms is guided by four objectives, as follows:

- further the meaningful engagement of civil society and communities in Global Fund processes through bi-direction communication and the provision of accurate and accessible information;
- improve the overall impact of Global Fund programs and interventions through strengthened engagement of civil society and communities affected by HIV, TB and malaria;

- expand access to technical assistance (TA) for civil society and communities through greater coordination with the CRG-SI short-term TA component, as well as other TA providers and opportunities; and
- 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.

Platforms work to achieve these objectives in a variety of ways. One of the most common platform activities is assisting CSOs in accessing and applying for [technical assistance through the CRG-SI](#), or from external providers such as [Expertise France](#), [WHO](#), [UNAIDS](#) and others. The platforms are expected to be well acquainted with the available TA in their region, and can therefore play a sort of “matchmaker” function with those in need of the TA. Identifying TA needs and generating demand are critical steps in this process, as TA – from the Fund and others – has often gone underutilized by CSOs, despite the widespread need. Platform personnel may often support CSOs in developing TA requests, ensuring that they are in alignment with the TA available, are complete and are prepared in the appropriate language.

According to Metheny, “The Platforms can facilitate a bi-directional feedback loop – as a conduit of information and support to community groups, while also sharing needs, challenges, gaps and other feedback from community groups with the Fund.” This facilitator function is at the core of how the platforms implement their work. The platforms have demonstrated community reach, credibility and communication effectiveness among civil society stakeholders – such that they are able to identify needs (informational, TA-related) and provide quality support to communities within the context of Global Fund processes and disease responses.

Another common activity of the platforms is the development of tools and guidance documents for communities and CSOs. For example, the Anglophone Africa Platform, hosted by EANNASO, developed a collection of “community guides” on various topics that are relevant for CSOs and communities, but that are often shrouded in mystery, jargon and perceptions of irrelevance. The [nine-piece series](#) covers densely technical topics such as the Fund’s [Key Populations Action Plan](#), its [allocation methodology](#), and its [Sustainability, Transition and Co-Financing Policy](#). Each topic is explained in accessible language and contextualized for community audiences. Importantly, each guide is visually attractive, concise and easy to digest. One example of synergy among the platforms in the previous round was the MENA platform’s translation of some of these English-language community guides into the predominant languages in its region: Arabic and French.

Speaking to how the work of the Anglophone Africa platform is expected to evolve over the next period, EANNASO’s Executive Director, Olive Mumba, had this to say:

“The Anglophone platform will strengthen the voices and contributions of civil society and community groups that are currently engaged in Global Fund processes to understand and effectively carry out their roles through experience-sharing, joint-learning and documentation. This is mainly aimed at civil society and community representatives on CCMs and who are implementing Global Fund grants.”

Mumba also noted that another key evolution of the platform would be to develop a calendar of national strategic plan development processes around the region, so as to be able to provide more support to communities to engage with those processes as well.

Another example of how the platforms carry out their work is through in-person workshops and consultations. Most of the platforms convene these types of meetings at least once per year, with some organizing a variety of face-to-face engagement opportunities. One such consultation was convened by the MENA platform for key population representatives from across the region in Marrakech, Morocco in December 2016 ([reported by Aidspace](#) in February 2017).

Other components of the CRG Strategic Initiative

The Regional Platforms for Communication and Coordination are one of three components of the CRG Strategic Initiative. The CRG-SI also includes a longer-term capacity development program for key and vulnerable population networks and the provision of short-term TA. The capacity development component includes intensive support to help strengthen the networks' administrative and financial capacities and to enable them to be more effective advocates for their respective communities. The component was formerly operationalized through a partnership with the [Robert Carr Civil Society Networks Fund](#) (RCNF), but will be managed internally by the Fund moving forward. However, the Fund will continue to work closely with the RCNF on this component since they share many of the same grantees.

As noted above, the regional platforms have a defined relationship with the TA component of the CRG-SI in that they are expected to help facilitate CSOs' awareness and accessing of the available TA. TA is provided by an assortment of pre-qualified NGOs, CSOs and other community and civil society partners. The Global Fund recently posted a new [list of providers](#), along with an update of the [CRG-TA webpage](#), and all of the online materials associated with the program, including TA request forms in [Arabic](#), [English](#), [French](#), [Portuguese](#), [Russian](#) and [Spanish](#).

TA through this program is now available to support CSOs and community groups to engage in processes throughout the Global Fund grant life-cycle – including grant-making and grant implementation (which were not part of the previous Special Initiative). The CRG team is actively accepting and processing TA requests at this time. While the regional platforms are available to support CSOs in accessing CRG-SI technical assistance, CSOs can also submit TA requests directly to the Global Fund by sending completed request forms to crgta@theglobalfund.org.

The author of this article, Charlie Baran, serves as a consultant technical advisor to the MENA platform, hosted by ITPC-MENA.

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