



Independent observer
of the Global Fund

'REALITIES ON THE GROUND' FOR ASIA-PACIFIC CIVIL SOCIETY'S ENGAGEMENT IN GLOBAL FUND 'COUNTRY DIALOGUE' ARE IMPROVING

A [report just published](#) by the Asia Pacific Council of AIDS Service Organizations (APCASO), to look at 'realities on the ground' in Global Fund grants in seven countries in the Asia-Pacific region, concludes that civil society and communities have had increasing opportunities to engage with the Fund over the past two funding cycles. However, a number of challenges – first identified in 2015 – continue to limit their meaningful engagement, despite some subsequent improvements in these areas.

The report was based on a survey carried out in 2018 in seven countries, by the Asia Pacific Platform on Communities, Rights & Gender (APCRG), and [was published on 20 January 2020](#).

The three main issues the report highlights are the English-language barrier that limits communities' full engagement, the lack of preparatory meetings among civil society and communities before the start of the country dialogue process, and low awareness among civil society of the need to engage continuously throughout the funding cycle. In addition, the report found that there is a need to ensure functional two-way channels of communication between CCM representatives and their constituencies.

Background, objective, methodology

The dual objectives of the report were: (1) to address whether the barriers to civil society and community engagement in the country dialogue process that were documented during the Global Fund's 2017-2019 funding cycle have been successfully addressed, and (2) to document the remaining or emerging barriers to meaningful civil society engagement in the current funding cycle. The Global Fund's 2017-2022 Strategy includes an operational objective to "support meaningful engagement of key and vulnerable

populations and networks in Global Fund-related processes”. Practically, this is supposed to happen through the country dialogue process, where communities’ and civil society’s roles and views on the design, implementation, and monitoring of Global Fund grants are captured.

On the first objective, the report intends to build on a previous assessment of civil society and community engagement in four countries, published by APCASO in 2015. It also draws from the 2016 CRG Needs Assessment Report, and ‘Between the Lines,’ an assessment of the inclusion of CRG priorities in Global Fund concept notes in Asia and the Pacific.

The report’s content and findings are drawn primarily from a September 2018 survey conducted by the Asia Pacific Community, Rights and Gender Communication and Coordination Platform (APCRG) in seven countries: Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Vietnam – though the report expresses the hope that the findings will be relevant to Asia in general. APCRG received 305 responses to the survey, and followed these with 7 key informant interviews, to add qualitative depth and context.

The survey, which was anonymous, asked respondents to discuss their experience of engagement in Global Fund processes since October 2016. It was translated into seven languages and disseminated through APCRG key country partners, in some cases face to face, in others online or through phone interviews. The majority of the respondents worked for community organizations (52%), and the second-largest group for NGOs (38%), with others from INGOs (3%) and about 7% for key-populations networks. HIV-related civil society represented 95% of the respondents, reflecting (the report said) the high level of civil society mobilization on HIV as compared to TB and malaria.

Main findings

CCM’s role in creating an enabling environment

Because it is the Country Coordinating Mechanism’s responsibility to create an enabling environment for civil society engagement, the survey included five questions whose aim was to assess the level of engagement. Results varied from country to country in terms of the CCM’s capacity to create an environment “more conducive” to civil society, community and key population engagement, with Sri Lanka and Pakistan expressing “an overall scepticism with regard to the achievements of the CCM”. In contrast, Cambodia and Vietnam rated their CCM performance highly. The report points out that these findings should be seen in the context of the CCM Evolution process, with these gaps having been pointed out before.

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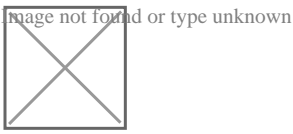


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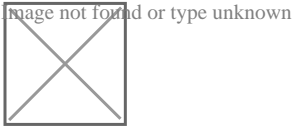
Access to information

The survey asked about specific items of information to which civil society representatives may have had access: the finalized funding request, the finalized budget, and the TRP comments specific to their respective countries. The reports says that the survey results showed that on average only one third of respondents had access to the finalized funding request and budget, and only one fifth to the TRP comments – but that these averages mask a variation in which documents are or are not available across the seven countries. The report says this suggests the need for clear guidelines from the Global Fund regarding the dissemination of essential information to certain audiences.



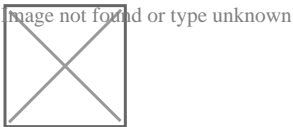
Civil society engagement: opportunities, degree of satisfaction

While the country dialogue process creates opportunities for civil society and community engagement throughout the ‘key stages’ of the Global Fund processes (preparation of the National Strategic Plan (NSP), national stakeholders’ consultation meetings, developing the funding request, grant-making negotiations, monitoring of grant implementation), it seems that grantmaking continues to be a ‘key bottleneck’ for civil society and communities.



Survey results indicate that representatives of CS and affected communities were present at each stage of the country dialogue process in six of the seven countries, but the lack of opportunities for civil society, communities and key population groups to meet and strategize before national consultation meetings was highlighted by APCASO in 2015 as a barrier to meaningful engagement.

In terms of respondents’ satisfaction with the degree of their engagement specifically in three aspects of the country dialogue process (NSP development, funding request development, grantmaking), the report says there was a correlation between the level of engagement at each stage and respondents’ satisfaction with the outcomes – the more they were engaged, the higher their level of satisfaction. However, during the funding cycle, the levels of both engagement and satisfaction decreased, with the highest levels of participation and engagement occurring at the beginning of the process (NSP) and the lowest at the end (grantmaking). This trend was consistent in six of the countries (Lao PDR was the exception), and reinforces one of the conclusions of APCASO’s 2015 report: as the focus moves increasingly towards specific resource allocation, “there is increasing resistance against engagement of non-traditional stakeholders, especially civil society and community representatives”. Nonetheless, in 2018 there was still some engagement of civil society towards the end of the process, unlike in 2015, when it stopped before grantmaking.



Open questions on key enabling or obstructing factors

The survey included open-ended questions to allow respondents the opportunity to offer a more narrative version of key barriers to their engagement. In answer to a question asking them to identify the key factors that had enabled or hindered their capacity to engage in Global Fund processes during that grant cycle, three common issues emerged:

1. “Lack of information” or “ineffective channels for information exchange”
2. The CCM’s role in supporting them – respondents could engage when there were community representatives on the CCM, or had difficulty engaging when there weren’t or the CCM did not function well
3. Challenges in meeting Global Fund standards for monitoring and evaluation.
- 4.

Conclusions and recommendations

The conclusions drawn by the report are reframed as updates to the three primary issues identified in APCASO’s 2015 assessment of civil society engagement:

- Lack of opportunity for preparatory meetings among CS and community stakeholders before the start of the country dialogue process: This has improved, with CS or community-led preparatory meetings organized in all seven countries surveyed before the country dialogue and during the development of the NSP and funding request (with some variation in the degree of inclusiveness);
- Low awareness among CS of the need to engage throughout the funding cycle/model, especially during grantmaking, resulting in the defunding of community priority programs: “Significant improvements have been made on this front,” the report says.
- English as the primary language during key stages of the process limiting CS and community representatives’ capacity to meaningfully engage in discussions during multi-stakeholder meetings: This remains a persistent issue.

In addition, “the key emerging issue” identified through the survey, the report says, “is the lack of institutional mechanisms to ensure a functional two-way channel of communication between CCM representatives and their constituency”, with a “varied level of progress on the inclusiveness of the CCMs across the region” since the last funding cycle. Though most interviewees welcomed the fact that someone was on the CCM to speak on their behalf, the absence of an effective two-way communication channel “undermined the legitimacy of their representatives”, the report says, as the representatives had limited knowledge of the actual stance of their constituents on specific issues. The report says that grassroots organizations in most countries “continue to feel little ownership for the decisions taken within the CCM”.

However, the “overall trajectory” in the countries surveyed (with the exception of Sri Lanka) is positive, the reports says. In answer to a question about what changes respondents had seen in how civil society was engaged during [that] funding cycle, respondents “overwhelmingly report[ed] improvements,” in terms of program impact and their own meaningful engagement.

Recommendations

The recommendations ultimately emerging from the report call for policy interventions that the authors believe would have a positive impact on the meaningful engagement of civil society and communities in the Global Fund’s processes.

1. Take a proactive approach to the diffusion of key documents relative to the funding request development process (draft and finalized funding request, budget, and the TRP comments): translate them into local languages, promote the circulation of short and understandable executive summaries, and support the launch meetings for stakeholders, civil society, and communities.
2. Support opportunities for civil society and communities to organize in-person strategic meetings ahead of consultations.
3. Promote the use of local languages through the funding request development process.
4. Promote the development of mechanisms to ensure the continuous engagement of CCM representatives with their constituencies, including regular in-person meetings.

Further reading:

- APCASO’s [‘Global Fund Realities on the Ground’ full report](#) (January 2020)
- [APCASO and APCRG’s press release](#) for the report’s launch
- [‘Global Fund CCM Evolution pilot has enhanced CCM oversight and linkages, Secretariat says’](#), (GFO 368, 16 November 2019)

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