New report finds improvements in Malawi's Global Fund program for key and vulnerable populations, credits community engagement

A new report from the International Council of AIDS Service Organizations (ICASO) finds that Malawi's Global Fund program improved in a number of ways during the 2017-2019 funding cycle. The total funding requested for key and vulnerable populations rose dramatically, and service packages for these groups were defined in greater detail. According to the report, a broad and systematic community engagement process contributed to these positive changes.

Yet, the title— "No such accountability is available on the ground"—draws attention to one of the report's key conclusions: despite the many strengths of the funding request and its development process, there is a lack of community monitoring initiatives to ensure follow-through during grant implementation.

Aidspan has previously reported on Malawi's 2017-2019 Global Fund funding request, as well as studies that show community engagement in Global Fund processes to be particularly effective there (see August 2015 GFO article).

The ICASO report covers five main dimensions of the 2017-2019 funding-request development process in Malawi: (1) The amount of funding requested for community-focused interventions, (2) the quality of program design, (3) the inclusion of community-articulated priorities, (4) perspectives from community representatives, and (5) a good-practice road map based on lessons learned. The report concludes with a series of recommendations for different stakeholders.

Increased funding for key and vulnerable populations in Malawi

In total, $10.28 million was requested for prevention programs among sex workers, men who have sex with men (MSM) and prisoners, in the 2017-2019 cycle, compared to $1.23 million in the 2014-2016 cycle (Figure 1). The amount of funding for adolescents and youth also increased dramatically. Malawi is among the 13 countries prioritized by the Global Fund for intensified investments in adolescent girls and young women (AGYW) (see January 2017 GFO article).

Figure 1. Comparison of total funding requested in Malawi's 2014-2016 and 2017-2019 Global Fund funding requests (select modules)

For community systems strengthening (CSS), there was a significant decrease in requested funds. Key informants quoted in the report suggest that there was pressure from the CCM to focus on human resources and commodity security instead. This de-prioritization of CSS is linked to the report's top-line finding that improved community monitoring is direly needed in Malawi.

At the 39th Global Fund Board Meeting in May 2018, a strategy implementation update highlighted the limited CSS funding in grants. Money for CSS constitutes just 5% of approved funding for building resilient and sustainable systems for health (RSSH). The update says the Global Fund is pursuing ongoing internal engagement to build consensus on the value add of community-based monitoring and feedback mechanisms.

More comprehensive service packages

Along with increased funding for key and vulnerable populations in the 2017-2019 cycle, there are also clear improvements in program quality in Malawi. The report includes a comparative table with the specific language in the 2014-2016 and the 2017-2019 funding requests for key community-focused modules.

The reach targets for sex workers and MSM significantly increased to scale up access to services. The grant aims to cover 6000 sex workers and 3600 MSM with a comprehensive package, compared to 2000 and 1350 in the last cycle, respectively. These key populations programs expressly move from partial service packages to comprehensive ones, as well as from fragmented delivery to a one-stop-shop approach.

For AGYW, the 2017-2019 funding request explicitly mentions a focus on quality over quantity, reducing the reach targets to expand and improve the depth and breadth of the package of services offered. Structural elements are introduced for AGYW, including activities to address gender-based violence, keep girls in school, and strengthen economic opportunities.

The report raises a concern that, unlike the other modules, the community responses and systems module (formerly called CSS) is lacking in specificity and missing key human rights and gender considerations.

Inclusion of community priorities in the funding request

Community priority-setting and advocacy efforts are linked to the improvements in requested funding and program quality for key modules. With support from ICASO, a broad consultative country dialogue process was led by the Malawi Network of AIDS Service Organizations (MANASO) and by the vice-chair of the Country Coordinating Mechanism (CCM), who represents civil society. A set of community priorities were documented during this process.

Of the 26 priorities set by communities during country dialogue, 16 were either fully or partially included in

the final submission to the Global Fund (Table 1). Many priorities related to key and vulnerable populations were included. However, priorities related to monitoring treatment stockouts, developing community scorecards, conducting community oversight and feeding back monitoring information to communities were not fully taken on board.

Table 1. Inclusion of community priorities in Malawi's Global Fund funding request (2017-2019)

Community Priority	Level of Inclusion in Fu Request
Increased condom education and distribution	Partially Included
Reduce HIV incidence among AGYW through both testing and treatment of potential sexual partners (men 15-40) and primary prevention	Included
Creating an enabling work environment for sex workers (safety & security)	Not Included
HIV treatment adherence support for female sex workers (FSW)	Not Included
Access to HIV treatment for men who have sex with men	Included
Services for prison populations, including condom provision in prisons	Partially Included
Services for marginalized populations, including women and people with disabilities	Partially Included
Stigma reduction among people living with HIV	Not Included
Training of health workers in key population and human rights	Not Included
Reaching key populations with HIV testing	Included
Scale up HIV testing services in rural areas	Not Included
Community-based HIV testing services	Not Included
Male engagement to increase HIV testing among men	Included
Placement of CD4 equipment in rural health facilities	Not Included
Monitoring viral load suppression	Partially Included
Increased diagnostic technology for TB to reduce diagnosis time	Included
Test-and-start should be rolled out, together with TB screening	Partially Included
Increase the number of community health workers	Partially Included
Community and health center linkage, in order to increase referrals	Included
Involvement of community-based organizations in service delivery	Partially Included
Orienting community-based organizations (CBOs) in demand creation for HIV testing	Not Included
Reporting to communities and beneficiaries on grant progress	Not Included
Harmonization of interventions on community oversight of health facilities	Not Included
Coordination meetings at the district and national level	Partially Included
Evidence-based advocacy with community data scorecards	Partially Included
Monitoring of stock outs and malpractices	Partially Included

A more inclusive country dialogue, gaps in grant monitoring

To help explain the abovementioned successes and challenges, the report shares perspectives from 13 key informant interviews.

Informants link the improvements to Malawi's Global Fund program with a concrete priority-setting process, led by MANASO and civil society CCM representatives, and conducted through a wide and

inclusive country dialogue. According to a key informant from a civil-society umbrella body:

"Now [in 2017], we were able to go beyond Lilongwe. We were able to go subnational. The people on the ground—those that are at CBO [community-based organization] level—had their voices added to the table in the new grant. We were also able to expand the constituencies. We included the key populations, FSW, MSM, prisoners, women and young people. In the other round [in 2015], this was not comprehensive and now we were able to get the input of these groups to the table, which does really matter [for what gets included in the grant]."

However, significant gaps remain. A key informant from the National AIDS Commission flags the need for increased civil society capacity and community monitoring support:

"Due to the lack of capacity on the part of the CSOs [civil society organizations] to check the accountability of the PRs, SRs [sub-recipients] and SSRs [sub-sub-recipients]—if they are properly implementing on the ground—the transparency and accountability is also very weak. Since it is weak, no such accountability is available on the ground."

The report's emphasis on the need for improved community monitoring coincides with a November 2018 statement from Malawi's National Civil Society Consultative Forum for Global Fund. In that statement, 19 undersigned civil society organizations call for increased scrutiny over how Global Fund resources are being utilized in Malawi. Recent reports from the Office of the Inspector General raised similar accountability concerns (see January 2017 GFO story on OIG 2017 audit and August 2017 GFO story on OIG investigation into drug thefts).

Another shared theme in the ICASO report and the Consultative Forum statement is the need for sub-granting flexibilities so that more local CBOs are able to access Global Fund resources.

Ways to improve accountability

Based on lessons learned, the ICASO report concludes by urging communities in Malawi to stay engaged throughout the funding cycle, especially during grant implementation. Recommendations are targeted at civil society, technical partners, CCM members, and the Global Fund Secretariat.

The report calls for partners to invest in strengthening the monitoring, evaluation, oversight, and knowledge management mechanisms of MANASO, as the key coordinating body for CSOs. The authors suggest that CCM members identify innovative ways of providing feedback to their constituencies, including electronic-based systems. The report is also forward looking, recommending that the Global Fund ensures enough time between the issuance of allocation letters and submission windows, so that rigorous and meaningful community engagement can take place in the development of the request. The release of the allocation letters for the 2020-2022 funding cycle is anticipated towards the end of 2019.

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Disclosure: Gemma also consults directly with the Global Fund, supporting the Community, Rights and Gender Strategic Initiative. This was declared to Aidspan and was not considered a conflict of interest in light of the authors' unpaid contribution to the GFO in order to share the report's findings.

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