



Independent observer
of the Global Fund

AN INTERVIEW WITH ISAAC AWUONDO

1. Tell our readers a little bit about yourself, your background and your interests.

I am a Chartered Accountant by training; I completed my degree in accounting and finance at the University of Nairobi in 1980 and proceeded to London to work at BDO Binder Hamlyn, Chartered Accountants, while undertaking my professional exams. I qualified in 1984 before returning to continue working in Kenya in 1985. When people ask me what I do, I tell them that I am a bean counter who transitioned into business and thereafter bank management!

I've been in banking for over 34 years and I am currently the Chairman of NCBA Bank Kenya, the third largest bank in Kenya, which is part of the NCBA Group PLC and employs more than 2,300 in its markets. In my professional life I have played various roles: in mainstream finance, Treasury and in restructuring businesses. The past 26 years have been spent in building banking businesses across different markets in Africa.

On the non-banking side, I have been involved in a wide selection of charitable activities. Among these there are some that I consider to be particularly important: for example, for 15 years I have been one of the Trustees of the [Zawadi Africa Education Fund](#) providing scholarships to disadvantaged girls throughout Africa to attend universities all over the world. To date, we have supported about 800 girls through this Fund.

I am passionate about the environment and my work with the [Rhino Ark Charitable Trust](#), of which I was chairman until October 2020. This organization protects some of Kenya's critical water towers such as the Aberdare National Park and Mt Kenya, which are also considered essential to the black rhino's survival, through fencing off areas and key swathes of forestry to protect rhinos while ensuring the key water sources are not interfered with. As a result of my involvement in conservation, I was asked to join the

Kenyan Board of the [World Wildlife Foundation](#), which I have so far chaired for three years. Global conservation is very important to me.

I have two other hobbies. Firstly, music: I have supported the [Kenya Conservatoire of Music](#) for the past 24 years as one of its Directors and, of these, 20 years as Chairman. Secondly, I am also an avid art collector and I support several art initiatives in Kenya.

2. You are clearly a very busy man with all these philanthropic activities on top of what must be an extremely demanding 'day job'! So ? why Aidspace?

I have been involved with Aidspace for the past seven years. This came about because I was initially approached to advise government on reorganizing its investments and thinking through the challenges inherent in restructuring; and through this I became familiar with the Global Fund who was partnering with a Kenyan institution working on HIV. As such, I provided a bridge between activities on the ground in Kenya and the Fund's global remit.

I became the Chairman of Aidspace's Board three years ago and in a way symbolized the organization's transition from a North America-influenced program to one that is more locally focused, with its main office in Nairobi.

3. What do you see as the highlights of your time with Aidspace?

I am so pleased to have been part of Aidspace as it has come to be seen as the 'go-to' institution, regarded as a reference point to many governments regarding the Global Fund, the three diseases and health systems, not just in Africa and the English-speaking world but more recently in Francophone countries, as reflected by having the GFO in the two languages.

Aidspace is also supporting several Supreme Audit Authorities in French West Africa in their role of auditing governments' utilization of Global Fund funds. We are looking at how to extend this support to other countries.

Finally, Aidspace has also become regarded as an authoritative source of knowledge on all health issues and now, of course, that includes COVID-19.

4. Can you look into your crystal ball and tell us what COVID-19 means to work and life as we know it in the future?

I don't have a big enough crystal ball! But I won't be telling you anything you don't know when I say that the pandemic has changed the world in three fundamentally important ways and in things we previously took for granted.

The first of these is the major ramifications COVID has had on the travelling, hotel and leisure industries. We may never go back to the way things were before.

Secondly, we need to look to our mental health as we have less human contact with each other.

Thirdly, the work environment. I myself have gone from travelling extensively for work to no travel for more than a year. We have discovered that we can become even more productive and that working from home is now largely accepted by bosses and companies who will even provide us with the tools we need for doing this more effectively.

What does this mean for the Global Fund? Well, what the Global Fund should have learned is that it will have to look at how it operates from the perspective of being more prepared and better equipped to deal

with potential problems – a state of readiness, if you like, for future pandemics. It has to address increased collaboration with the World Health Organization; and it has to be prepared to push for more investment in research into the pandemic and its variants, since this has a direct impact on countries' health programs including those supported by the Fund.

5. And for Aidspace itself?

Aidspace has to be nimbler, better informed and build new bridges that go beyond its role of independent Global Fund watchdog. Just as the Global Fund's original mandate was the three diseases, then it included integrating health systems, and now it has had to move incredibly quickly to address COVID through its [C19RM](#) (COVID-19 Response Mechanism): so Aidspace will need to look at how it can help governments directly with their wider health issues through journalism and news reporting that helps countries, health practitioners and service providers understand topical issues of relevance to their work.

There are difficult questions to be asked that Aidspace is well-placed to do so. For example, was the lockdown the best option available to us in dealing with the pandemic? From another perspective, the pandemic has shown up our health systems' inability to deal with the problem in its entirety: countries' low investment in health systems has become glaringly apparent, especially when we look at how we have approached critical care and, indeed, our lack of adequate intensive care to cope with a health threat of such magnitude. Few countries can claim to have had an adequately functioning emergency medical response and this, more than ever, implies the need for greater investments in strong and resilient health systems.

Aidspace needs to be able to provide the right resource base. This means providing our readership with the resources they may need to better understand health systems and their degree of resiliency during a crisis; encouraging countries to undertake a self-assessment, if you like, that measures their preparedness and identifies appropriate remedial actions that can be built into the health system so that it can respond quickly and effectively to future emergencies.

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