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TRANSPARENCY AND STREAMLINED ACCOUNTABILITY: WHAT WATCHDOGS, GRANT IMPLEMENTERS AND OIG WANT

Both watchdogs and the OIG are having trouble accessing useful and complete country-level data to track and verify grant budgeting, expenditure and results data. There are also significant obstacles keeping implementers from meeting requirements for reporting to national oversight structures. These two conclusions drove two days of strategic discussions at an Aidspan roundtable in early August drawing participants from 10 countries.

Watchdogs from Burundi, Cameroon, Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe shared experiences, challenges and possible solutions on how to best deploy the existing country-level oversight agencies to support better data management for reporting, oversight and results-tracking.

The biggest challenge confronting these implementers is the multiplicity and size of the reporting task. In some countries, PRs are expected to report to up to 10 different structures during the implementation process, sometimes on a quarterly or monthly basis. Project auditors, fiduciary agents; the Fund's local fund agents and country teams; the CCM and relevant technical working groups: all of these different bodies demand, and expect, their own reports, diverting human resource from actual program implementation.

“Where is the time to implement adequately with such multiple reporting?” asked Michael Kachumi, from the Churches Health Association of Zambia (CHAZ). Kachumi suggested a streamlining and better coordination of the reporting process, suggesting, for example that CCMs attend LFA briefings rather than conducting their own site visits.

Country-level watchdogs seeking access to how Fund investments are translating into results in mitigating the burden of disease, said that the data just weren't there. And when they were, access was complicated. Rather than reliable and complete grant information about how much money is being transferred to sub-recipients (SRs) and lower level implementers, details are sparse, which makes verifying reported achievements difficult. These challenges also confront investigators from the Office of the Inspector General, according to senior policy and strategy manager Etienne Michaud.

"All grant implementers should display the same levels of transparency as the Global Fund at the country level," he said. "If grant data at the sub-recipient and lower implementing levels don't get provided in a more open way, online, as the Fund itself does, then results tracking will not improve. Additionally, the competing reporting pressures currently facing grant implementers could be combined in a streamlined or combined accountability structure if this is done right."

Other challenges shared included lack of independent funding for national watchdogs, competition between SRs and PRs for resources and unclear CCMs structures, mandate and roles.

The watchdogs also complained that many PRs are not accountable or that CCMs were still largely incapable of holding strong PRs accountable. "Being a recipient is almost a token and if you "misbehave" i.e. work or voice issues contrary to what the CCM leadership want, the CCM has the power to cut your funding off based on some frivolous excuse. There's no way for them to be independent watchdogs of the system from within," said James Kamau, a Kenyan watchdog.

"Watchdogging within the Global Fund system isn't officially recognized and many watchdogs involved in country dialogue and concept note development process for instance have relaxed, disengaging from critical processes such as grant negotiation and tracking of grant implementation and reporting," said Felix Mwanza from Zambia. "Many have also become grant implementers. The Global Fund country level system must maintain an independent group of watchers."

The OIG acknowledged the need to develop more links between country-level watchdogs and its office to strengthen the first line of defense against fraud and corruption. The new OIG Speak up! Campaign running through December 2015 aims to raise awareness of how country-level activists can help by providing better quality information through the OIG's reporting and whistle-blowing channels.

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