



Independent observer
of the Global Fund

THE GLOBAL FUND'S OMBUDSMAN CALLS FOR INCREASED DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION IN THE ORGANIZATION

A recent report by the ombudsman of the Global Fund indicated that the organization needs to embed and value diversity, inclusion, and human dignity at the workplace and in its interactions with implementing countries. The Global Fund has a [diverse workforce](#) with staff from more than 100 nationalities and a wide variety of professional backgrounds. However, factors relating to leadership, organizational systems and practices, and organizational culture act as barriers to realizing diversity and inclusion. The report titled 'Finding Voice' also notes that the role of the ombudsman is also under threat as new terms undermine its independence and other principles of practice.

The report was published by the previous ombudsman, at the end of her term, on 31 July 2020. The report focuses on three main topics: diversity, inclusion, and human dignity at the Global Fund, safeguarding the ombudsman's independence and principles of practice, and issues identified by the ombudsman between January 2019 and July 2020 (with supporting data). This article focuses on the first two.

It is an internal report of the Global Fund; forwarded to Aidspan by several anonymous sources.

Diversity, inclusion, and human dignity at the Global Fund

The [death of George Floyd](#) and the emergence of the [anti-racial movement](#), [Black Lives Matter](#), have sparked conversations about racism, diversity, inclusion, and human dignity at the Global Fund. In her capacity as a promoter of dialogue and expression, the ombudsman called for reflection and open conversations on how the Global Fund is fairing with diversity, inclusion, and human dignity. The ombudsman arranged an open dialogue in June 2020 and concomitantly conducted an anonymous survey open to staff, consultants, and interns. The report highlights the feedback from the dialogue and

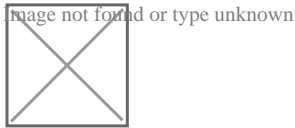
the survey.

Out of about 900 staff members, consultants, and interns, 120 answered the survey and 273 participated in the dialogue at its peak.

Diversity and inclusion at the Global Fund

The survey reflected mixed opinions on whether the Global Fund embodies and values diversity, inclusion, and human dignity (Figure 1). Many acknowledge that the Global Fund is a “diverse organization,” and some encouraged the institution to “take advantage of this diversity much more.”

Figure 1: Do you feel diversity, inclusion and human dignity are genuinely valued at our workplace?



Source: Finding Voice: A three-part from the Office of the Ombudsman

The thoughts, concerns, and ideas that emerged from the dialogue and survey relate to leadership, organizational systems and practices, organizational culture, and interactions between the Global Fund staff and implementer countries.

Diversity and inclusion are not reflected at management levels

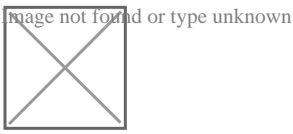
The survey and dialogue highlighted the relative lack of diverse representation at higher management levels in terms of race, gender, national and regional origins. For instance, the staff noted that white men, and western and anglophone cultures were dominant in mid- and high-level management, especially at the [Management Executive Committee \(MEC\)](#). The MEC is the highest level of management and currently has 12 members, nine of whom are male.

However, this situation is not unique to the Global Fund. The United Nations also faces a similar lack of diversity at its top levels. A [recent publication](#) by Foreign Policy found that westerners—from the United States (US) and Europe—are over-represented in senior positions across the United Nations bureaucracy. Meanwhile, citizens of developing countries are likely to occupy field jobs, especially in conflict zones.

In the same vein, the [Global Health 50/50](#) found that global health organizations were likely to be led by men from high-income countries, especially the United Kingdom and the US. According to the 2020 report, women from low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) make up only 5 percent of global health leadership. Global Health 50/50 has been tracking gender-related policies and practices of 200 global health organizations since 2018.

Data on the gender composition of Global Fund staff is not publicly available. However, the identities of Fund Portfolio Managers (FPMs), who head country teams and are the visible face of the Global Fund in-country are available on its [website](#). An Aidspan analysis of the gender composition of FPMs in countries with active grants found an almost equal gender representation: 51 percent male FPMs and 49 percent females (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Gender composition of Fund Portfolio Managers for Global Fund implementer countries



Source: An Aidsplan analysis

Data on the origin and ethnicity of staff members is harder to gather. However, using publicly available information, it appears that FPMs of African descent represent a small proportion of FPMs despite the Global Fund's investment of more than 70 percent of their resources in sub-Saharan Africa.

Inequities due to organizational systems and practices

Critics have said that some of the Global Fund's organizational systems and practices have led to inequity among its employees, consultants, and interns due to race, origin, and gender. These systems and processes include recruitment, salary negotiation and pay equity, compensation, performance evaluation and recognition, promotions, and accountability. There is therefore a need to address systemic obstacles and biases in the recruitment and promotion of staff.

Evidence shows that questions regarding salary history during the appointment or salary negotiation process disadvantages women, minorities and people who originate from lower-income areas or countries. The reason is that new employers base the current salary on the previous one, thus cementing the effects of a previously low salary. In [some states](#) in the US, the law forbids prospective employers from asking interviewees to disclose their previous salary. It is not clear what the practice is at the Global Fund, but a Global Fund staff member who was recruited in recent years, disclosed to the Global Fund Observer that they were not asked to provide details of their previous salary.

Organizational culture can better reflect and value diversity

Some responders to the survey indicated that the organizational culture and practices at the Global Fund are often a barrier to open conversations on diversity and inclusion due to the absence of trust and safe spaces. The findings of the survey identified fear as the most prevalent barrier to open discussion. The staff indicated their reluctance to speak up or raise concerns for fear of retaliation, reprisal, and negative consequences.

The responders also cited favoritism, 'colonial attitudes' and privilege, and prominence of anglophone and western cultures. At times, colleagues demonstrated a limited understanding of the value of diversity and inclusion as a practice. One of the respondents highlighted "a lack of flexibility from colleagues" in considering various "thinking and approaches".

Attitudes, approaches and representation relating to in-country partners and implementing countries

Some of the respondents noted that the Global Fund Secretariat's attitude and behavior is often perceived as arrogant, disrespectful and biased by the in-country partners. The report stated that the Global Fund staff sometimes projects a 'colonial' or 'savior' mentality rather than an attitude of servitude and humility. One of the comments summed up the issue as follows: "The [Global Fund] is known to be an arrogant organization, especially when interacting with country representatives. Staff can be rude and would not respect the level or seniority of the country people."

In-country partners lack recourse when disagreements with the Global Fund staff occur. Aidsplan therefore recently called on the Global Fund to extend the scope of the ombudsman function to [in-country partners](#) such as the Principal Recipients (PRs) and Country Coordinating Mechanisms (CCMs).

Course of action for the Global Fund

In-depth reviews and staff surveys

These surveys and dialogues are the first indicators of undercurrent risks. To better apprehend and mitigate those risks, it is important to conduct in-depth and independent reviews of systems and practices. The previous Ombudsman also recommended that the Secretariat creates safe spaces for reporting diversity-related issues and ongoing open conversations; and a staff working group to explore different aspects of diversity, inclusion, and human dignity.

These efforts will make a difference only if staff, consultants, and interns take advantage of the different channels that are being created.

Global Fund actively working towards diversity and inclusion

The ombudsman reported increased interest by managers who wanted to continue the conversation within their team and requested the ombudsman to facilitate the dialogues. However, the Global Fund will need a more [holistic approach](#) to better manage diversity and inclusion.

Responding to questions from the Global Fund Observer, the Secretariat explained that they already have initiatives in place to promote diversity and inclusion. The Secretariat currently runs mandatory training for all staff on human dignity and respect in the workplace, regular pulse surveys and deep dives on specific issues such as diversity and inclusion. Last year, the institution took steps towards achieving equal pay for staff members and underwent an external gender assessment to determine the gender-sensitivity of its human resources policies and procedures. Most recently, it recruited a specialist on diversity and inclusion.

However, the recent survey findings suggest that more needs to be done. The respondents shared ideas and suggestions related to the four areas mentioned above. For instance, the respondents asked the Global Fund leadership to acknowledge systemic issues, make diversity and inclusion an organizational priority, model behavior, and be open to dialogue. The respondents also suggested that the Global Fund review engagement and communication practices with in-country partners. The Secretariat concluded by saying: “We will continue to strengthen our values of diversity and inclusion both within the organization and in our engagement with our external partners, including implementing countries.”

Safeguarding the ombudsman function at the Global Fund

The Global Fund published the [Terms of Reference \(TOR\)](#) in July 2020 for the recruitment of a new Ombudsman. The ombudsman warned that the TOR veers away from international standards and best practice, reduces the independence and limits access to people and information necessary for the ombudsman’s effectiveness. The ombudsman recommended an independent evaluation of the ombudsman’s function at the Global Fund and the 2020 TOR by either the Office of the Inspector General or one of the Board Committees. Aidsman had already called for [careful consideration in the selection of the Global Fund’s new ombudsman](#).

Global Fund Observer posed a question to the Global Fund regarding the concern that the TOR undermine independence.

The Secretariat responded as follows:

The changes to the new ombudsman’s terms of reference do not weaken the independence of the function. In fact, the terms of reference make explicit the importance of independence, confidentiality, impartiality, and informality. The new terms of reference include these qualities together with discretion and protection against retaliation as “operating principles.”

The changes in the new ombudsman’s terms of reference are a result of engagement between staff and management and are intended to strengthen the function, clarifying responsibilities of key stakeholders, and ensuring that the role is more accessible and more responsive to staff. As well as providing independent, impartial and confidential advice, we are keen to see that the function contributes useful feedback and recommendations to help us achieve our collective endeavor to build a stronger culture of diversity, inclusion and human dignity at the Global Fund. A strong, independent, and effective ombudsman function is critically important for the Global Fund. Working with the Staff Council, we have engaged in a rigorous recruitment process and we are currently in the final stages of selecting a new ombudsman. We are confident that we have found a strong candidate.

Author’s note: The previous Ombudsman stated that she has high regard for the work of the Observer. She believes that mission-driven global organizations, in particular, stand to risk their credibility if they fail to earnestly advance on issues related to racism, equity, meaningful diversity and inclusion, and safeguard independent mechanisms of accountability. However, she must respectfully decline to comment on the Ombudsman’s report as it would not be appropriate to do so. The report speaks for itself.

Slight amendments have been made to this article on 5 November 2020.

Further reading:

- [Request for Proposal for Ombudsman services for the Global Fund](#)
- GFO Issue 385, [The Selection of the Global Fund’s new Ombudsman requires careful consideration](#), 26 August 2020

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