



Independent observer
of the Global Fund

ACTIVISTS RESPOND QUICKLY TO DECISION BY SWEDEN TO CUT ITS 2016 CONTRIBUTION TO THE GLOBAL FUND

Activists have surprised Sweden with the intensity of their reaction to the Swedish Government's decision to cut its 2016 contribution to The Global Fund by 35%. Even if activists are not successful at having the cut reinstated, they are hopeful that their strong response will have a positive impact on Sweden's pledge for 2017-2019.

[Riksförbundet för Sexuell Upplysning](#) (RFSU), the Swedish association for sexuality education, reported in mid-January that the Swedish Government had decided to cut its 2016 contribution to The Global Fund from SEC 850 million (\$102 million) to SEC 550 million (\$66 million), a reduction of SEC 300 million (\$36 million). This means that for 2014-2016, Sweden will contribute SEC 2.2 billion instead of the SEC 2.5 billion originally pledged.

The cut was part of a 30% reduction in Sweden's overseas development assistance budget in order to redirect funds to cover the increase in domestic refugee costs – an action that the government labeled “unfortunate but necessary.”

The UN Secretary General, Ban Ki-Moon had already [voiced alarm](#) at the planned aid cuts by the Nordic Countries back in November, 2015, stating that “resources for one area should not come at the expense of another.” Ban Ki-Moon called it “counter-productive” and said that the move reduced the opportunities for millions of people worldwide seeking to build better lives in their home countries.

RFSU and Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) Sweden, reacted rapidly to the planned cuts, writing to the Minister for International Development Cooperation, Isabella Lövin, and calling for the reinstatement of SEK 300 million to The Global Fund, as part of the Spring budget process.

The Global Fund Advocates Network (GFAN) mobilized its extensive network of NGOs and civil society to support the efforts of RFSU and MSF Sweden by drafting a public letter on 2 March 2016, to the Prime Minister of Sweden and by coordinating signatures. [The letter](#), signed by 159 organizations from across the world, urged the Government of Sweden to “stand by its global health commitments and to not make cuts in its contribution to the Global Fund at this crucial moment.”

The GFAN letter proved highly successful in supporting RFSU efforts to provoke domestic debate. RFSU used the sentiments and criticisms from the global NGO community to stir up a whirlwind of media coverage, much of which cited the GFAN letter. A short news piece with the tagline “Organizations criticize Sweden” reached nearly all parts of Sweden, running in three of the main Swedish newspapers and the main business paper, as well as at least 20 local papers.

Minister Lövin responded to the heavy criticism with a newspaper [op-ed](#) [in Swedish] in an effort to explain the Government’s decisions. Mari Mörtz, of MSF Sweden, responded quickly to the article, stating that “we cannot afford to have malaria, tuberculosis and HIV added to the list of forgotten crises in the world.”

Several researchers from the Karolinska Institutet added to the [debate](#) hosted by the Svenska Dagbladet newspaper online, stating that “the Minister ignores health research” and that “the cuts now being proposed may have serious long-term consequences” The CEO, a senior adviser and project manager from the think-tank [Global Utmaning](#) (Global Challenge), also posted a response on the Swedish web-portal [Biståndsdebatten.se](#), which hosts exclusive op-eds on Swedish development cooperation, saying that “[reduced health aid – not a good signal when Agenda 2030 is launched](#).”

This resulted in a final ‘parting word’ on the topic by the Minister, in which she welcomed the responses of MSF, Karolinska Institutet and Global Utmaning, noting that it confirms the “enormous value of Swedish aid,” but “in this difficult situation, we have chosen to prioritize the areas where Swedish aid makes most useful: the most serious humanitarian crises, peace-building, and sexual and reproductive health and rights.”

These pieces did not go unnoticed on the “Twitter-sphere” where State Secretary for Development Cooperation Ulrika Modéer [[?@UlrikaModeer](#)] members of parliament, MSF Sweden [[@MSF_Sweden](#)] and RFSU [[@RFSU](#)] debating the topic.

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A rough translation of the above tweet by Vater Mutt, a member of Parliament, is: “To restore the money to @Global Fund as soon as possible. The Spring budget?”

The Spring budget, which goes to parliament in April 2016, is currently being negotiated, so it may be an uphill battle to reverse the cut. Nevertheless, activists believe that they have been able to show how important global health priorities are to the Swedish voters and the wider international community; and how important Swedish ODA is in pushing the forward the agenda to end the epidemics.

In her [response](#) to the GFAN open letter, Minister Lövin reiterated her government’s arguments from the public debates, and stated that Sweden has “initiated a constructive dialogue with the Global Fund and we will continue our joint efforts to put an end to the diseases as a global public health threats by 2030.” Swedish CSOs will be meeting with Marjike Wijnroks, The Global Fund’s Chief of Staff, in the coming weeks, with an aim to keep these “constructive dialogues” working towards an ambitious replenishment.

Globally, activists are worried that Sweden’s rationale could set a dangerous precedent for other donors. For this reason, they say, The Global Fund needs continued support from civil society for the Fifth Replenishment. Whilst the strong advocacy and domestic debate in Sweden has not yet resulted in the funding cut being reinstated, it nevertheless underscores the importance of the role of civil society in keeping governments accountable.

For organizations and countries wanting to ramp up their advocacy efforts to build support for the fifth Global Fund replenishment campaign, the work of RFSU, MSF Sweden, GFAN and their extended network is an example of what can be achieved in a short period of time. GFAN has made available campaign tools and resources ([here](#)) to support local advocacy efforts.

See related article on the replenishment [here](#)

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