

The 52nd Global Fund Board Meeting

Lilongwe, Malawi 19-22, November 2024

Global Fund Technical Review Panel and Evaluation Workplans and Budgets

The 52nd Board meeting of the Global Fund in Malawi from November 18 to 22, 2024 brought together leaders and stakeholders to review priorities and make critical decisions in the fight against global pandemics. Among the key topics discussed was the Secretariat's Operating Expense budget (OPEX), among which were two critical budget components:

- The 2025 Workplan and Budget
- The 2025 Technical Review Panel (TRP) Workplan and Budget

These support essential evaluation activities and technical review processes for the Global Fund's grant cycles.

A robust governance and financial decision-making framework ensures transparency and accountability at all levels. The Strategy Committee (SC) initiates the process by evaluating and recommending the budget, which is then integrated into the broader OPEX budget by the Audit and Finance Committee (AFC) before final approval by the Global Fund Board. This tiered approach reinforces fiscal responsibility and adherence to governance protocols.

In July 2024, the Strategy Committee (SC), with guidance from the Independent Evaluation Panel (IEP), approved the 2025 Annual Work Plan for the Evaluation Function, allowing for early preparation of evaluations in 2025. This approval, which preceded the finalization of the 2025 Operating Expense (OPEX) budget, was intended to effectively display evaluations and provide timely insights for Grant Cycle 8 (GC8).

Overview of the 2025 Annual Work Plans

The 2025 Annual Evaluation Work Plan and Budget embodies the Global Fund's strategic commitment to conducting efficient and impactful evaluations. Presented first at the 26th Strategy Committee meeting before being approved at the 52nd Board meeting, it not only specified budget requirements, but also served as a roadmap for addressing critical global health priorities, such as HIV prevention and gender equality. These plans, along with the 2025 Work Plans and Budgets for the Technical Review Panel (TRP) and the Independent Evaluation Function, underscore the Global Fund's commitment to strengthening its operational and evaluation frameworks to advance the goals of global health financing.

Through early approval of the budget, the Global Fund aimed to restructure implementation and ensure that its evaluations are conducted in a timely manner and provide actionable insights for future initiatives. Central to this effort is the Technical Review Panel (TRP), an independent body that is an integral part of the Fund's operations. The TRP conducts technical assessments of funding requests, documents lessons learned, and advises the Board on strategic health financing decisions. The 2025 Work Plan prioritizes equipping the TRP to meet the requirements of the GC8 (2026-2028), thereby strengthening its role in advancing the Global Fund's mission to address emerging global health challenges.

What are the Key Activities and Financial Allocation of the 2025 TRP Work Plan?

The 2025 TRP Work Plan Key Activities and Financial Allocation focuses on the following:

Review Processes: focused on completing key evaluations for [Grant Cycle 7 \(GC7\)](#). This includes remote reviews of the remaining GC7 applications scheduled for Q2 2025 to ensure that all applications are thoroughly and efficiently reviewed. In addition, the TRP will continue its critical work on Priority Above Allocation Requests (PAARs) and applicant clarifications. These ongoing assessments not only increase the technical rigor of funding recommendations, but also provide valuable insights for improving the Global Fund's allocation processes.

GC8 Preparations and Recruitment: To prepare for the demands of Grant Cycle 8 (GC8), the plan allocates funds for GC8 preparation and recruitment. A significant portion of this budget is dedicated to updating governance documents, such as operational manuals and terms of reference, and aligning the TRP framework with GC8 objectives. Recruitment processes will also be enhanced through the use of specialized agencies to attract highly qualified TRP members. These efforts aim to strengthen the TRP's capacity to address complex global health challenges during the 2025-2028 allocation period, ensuring a seamless transition and operational readiness.

Governance and leadership: allocations cover activities to support leadership transitions, performance assessments, and remote working groups. These initiatives are designed to maintain the TRP's high performance and adaptability in a rapidly evolving global health landscape. In addition, the TRP will continue to actively participate in Board and committee meetings to ensure that its activities are aligned with the Global Fund's overarching organizational priorities. This strategic focus reinforces the TRP's role as a key advisory body in driving effective health outcomes.

What are the main goals of the 2025 Annual Evaluation Work Plan?

The main goals of the 2025 Work Plan include:

- Evaluations on HIV Prevention and [Gender](#): These focus areas reflect the Fund's commitment to addressing pressing global health challenges.
- Operational Efficiency: Early preparatory actions, like drafting Terms of Reference (ToRs) and launching Requests for Proposals (RfPs), demonstrate a proactive approach to minimizing delays.
- Stakeholder Inclusivity: The evaluations aim to be evidence-driven while reducing burdens on participating entities.

Allocation break-up of the Annual Evaluation Budget

The allocation for the 2025 Annual Evaluation Workplan includes:

1. Independent evaluation costs: Includes professional fees and activities for HIV prevention and gender studies.
2. Panel Operations: Supports the Independent Evaluation Panel (IEP) with meeting costs, travel expenses, and honoraria.
3. Learning Dissemination: Covers costs for staff engagement, presentation of evaluation findings at global health events, and participation in governance forums.

This financial structure aligns with the Operating Expenses (OPEX) framework, which provides a sustainable model for resource allocation.

Annual Evaluation Workplan – Operational Readiness

Operational readiness with evaluations will start in early 2025.

Two Requests for Proposals (RfPs) for evaluations on HIV prevention and gender are being prepared, pending budget approval.

The proposed steps are that once approved, the Evaluation & Learning Office (ELO) will proceed with contracting evaluation service providers and initiating evaluations in early 2025.

The evaluations will be designed to stagger activities and minimize the burden on stakeholders. The results of these evaluations will inform preparations for Grant Cycle 8 and improve decision making with evidence-based insights.

The strategic staggering of evaluations will reduce time pressures and allow for systematic stakeholder engagement.

The streamlined budget reflects the Global Fund's commitment to efficiency and proactive forward planning. Key recommendations for success include:

- **Enhancing Remote Effectiveness:** Establish mechanisms to evaluate the efficiency of remote operations, ensuring that cost-saving measures do not compromise the quality of outcomes.
- **Building Stakeholder Engagement:** Strengthen communication with governance and funding bodies to promote alignment and facilitate smooth implementation of activities.
- **Optimizing Recruitment:** Identify cost-saving alternatives in recruitment processes to reduce reliance on external agencies while maintaining the quality of hires.

Examining the Technical Review Panel Budget

The OPEX report on the Global Fund's operational expenses noted that, "The 2025 budget for In-country assurance and Independent Bodies is maintained at a similar level as 2024 (US\$ 0.4M decrease). The slight reduction relates to assurance due to the cyclical nature of business needs, translating to reduced funding for the Technical Review Panel."

There are three key factors influencing the TRP's 2025 budget:

1. **Professional fees (49%):** Reflects the increased complexity of activities and fee adjustments.
2. **Travel (9%):** Limited to essential governance activities and face-to-face leadership transitions.
3. **Staffing (42%):** Critical for operational support of the TRP Secretariat.

The proposed budget for 2025 reflects a decrease from \$1.72 million in 2024 to \$1.45 million, consistent with the anticipated reduction in workload as Grant Cycle 7 (GC7) activities wind down. Despite the overall decrease, the budget accounts for inflationary adjustments and an increase in the TRP member honorarium rate from \$700 to \$800 per day. These adjustments contribute to slightly higher spending compared to 2022, when the budget was \$1.3 million, ensuring fair compensation and operational sustainability as the TRP prepares for the demands of Grant Cycle 8 (GC8).

One of the reductions has been of travel costs. The plans now clearly state that the only in-person activities will be of the TRP leadership participating in the Board and Committee meetings and when it hands over at the end of 2025 to the next elected leadership. It is to be noted that the In-person meetings usually take place in Geneva in the Global Fund campus. However, there have been requests for holding these elsewhere. But this would burden the TRP secretariat as well and resources to absorb costs and expertise would need to be available. With rising travel costs, this is also a tall ask. However, given the diversity of the TRP membership, perhaps ways need to be explored to get them to weigh in on a more regular basis in-person because there is something to be said as the Ombudsperson put it so well, while

speaking of her own walk-throughs, about the “personal presence of people” that is not the same as screen time. Moreover, a constituency in the run-up to the Board meeting pointed out that countries with concentrated epidemics, which are in the focus countries of Global Fund grants in Asia, Eastern Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean regions, and comprise 9% of its investment necessitates approximately 25% of the grant-related workforce that must oversee these grants. This is unviable in the long-term and as pointed out by other constituencies, sometimes entire high impact country-dedicated teams arrive and station themselves with nearly three visits on an average monthly. There was a request to return to the mode of work during Covid, when the teams remained grounded! At the very least, these visits need to be reduced and funds defraying their travel costs can be directed towards independent bodies like the TRP, which has been closeted to the screen henceforth.

The importance of the TRP has to be seen in the context of what the Global Fund stated in its OPEX report – that its focus will remain on enhancing the data use in monitoring, performance, decision making, and learning, and this would include the use of high-quality evaluations. The work of the TRP will become even more critical given that at the committee meetings preceding the Board meet, constituencies pointed out the imperative of ensuring that the new risks associated with the enhanced and at times unchecked use of biometric data, digital technologies, and Artificial Intelligence (AI) are met. This will require integration of community engagement including their taking leadership on their data usage, and human rights-based approach.

The TRP is an independent and “essential advisory body” as pointed out by a constituency and reiterated in the Global Fund report as well. It draws on a wide swathe of expertise in its [members](#) and hence, is best positioned to create a robust system to inure and address these risks if they make their way into grant proposals and programmatic design and to assure successful implementation of changes at the policy level to implement sustainability. But this will happen only when the worth of the TRP can be optimized. It’s not a question of monetary resources. It’s about the Global Fund’s willingness to really want to seek out the knowledge bank it has.

In light of the above, it’s worrying that there was little to no feedback from constituencies specifically on the TRP reports on its plans and budget when it was first presented at the committee meeting prior to the Board meet as well as regarding its funding as part of the consolidated OPEX budget presented to the Board. After all, it is this body that is the pitstop for grant proposals and it is this leadership that serves in ex-officio member positions on both the Strategy Committee and Board.

Would it not help if the bugbear of the Global Fund – its verbose reportage, its unwieldy documentary processes – could be reviewed by the TRP beginning with the grant proposal stage? It’s to be noted that the OIG in its comments during the presentation of its budget, which also forms a part of OPEX, drew attention to this very aspect:

Right now some countries are submitting thousands of pages for the funding request access we would expect to cut, and I'm not exaggerating. We will know the reason by the way we will be looking at cutting down the analysis from the other common requests and at the very start of the funding cycle, cutting things down.

Further, given that the OPEX budget mentioned that the Secretariat found that implementers were unhappy about automating the process for the current cycle underlines that there is more work that needs to be done, including the basics – keep it simple. The potential of the Technical Review Panel, which oversees funding requests could weigh in. Why isn't it already? Has it not been asked?

Given the challenges that the Global Fund face in reducing barriers for key populations to be able to access critical services, a constituency had suggested in the run-up to the Board meeting, that the Global Fund needs to really look at grantmaking approaches that are directed to community organizations and advocacy. These, however, became passing mentions when actual talks take place. This is a critical area going forward and could be referred to the TRP as it also advises the Board on strategic health financing decisions. The Global Fund is clearly lagging on the aspect of community engagement so is this what is holding the Global Fund back from serious consideration of such a direction is something the TRP could examine.

Decision Point: 2025 Work Plan and Budget Narrative and the 2025 Operating Expenses Budget

Based on the recommendation of the Audit and Finance Committee (AFC), the Board approves the following:

- a. the 2025 Work Plan and Budget Narrative, as set forth in GF/B52/06A; and
- b. the 2025 Operating Expenses Budget in the amount of US\$ 346.0 million, which includes US\$ 15,769,831 for the Office of the Inspector General's 2025 Operating Expenses, US\$ 5,037,310 for the Ethics Office's 2025 Operating Expenses, US\$ 3,561,763 for the Evaluation Function's 2025 Operating Expenses, and US\$ 1,452,864 for the Technical Review Panel's Operating Expenses, as set forth in GF/B52/06A.

[Read More](#)
