# Challenges Faced by Round 5 Applicants

In a Commentary in GFO #18, in February 2004, Bernard Rivers described six challenges faced by applicants submitting proposals for Round 4 (see www.aidspan.org/gfo/bydate). In Round 5, applicants faced many of the same problems, plus some new ones. There is much about the applications process that could be improved. Now is the time to fix these problems, while we wait for a decision to be made concerning the timing of the sixth round of funding.

In his Commentary on the Round 4 application process, Bernard identified the following challenges:

1. The application form was too long and complex.
2. The application form questions were sometimes ambiguous.
3. The online version of the application form was unusable for many applicants.
4. There was insufficient technical assistance available to applicants.
5. There was confusion regarding the role of the private sector in applications to the Global Fund.
6. There was uncertainty concerning how to bundle mini-applications (i.e., the mini-proposals prepared by stakeholders in-country for roll-up into the national proposal).

In this article, I would like to outline some additional challenges faced by applicants in Round 5.

Challenge 1: The PDF version of the applications form was very difficult to use.

In Round 4, there were four different versions of the applications form: a Word version, a read-only PDF version, an online version and a CD-ROM version (which was similar to the online version). Applicants experienced a lot of difficulty with the online version, and the Global Fund Secretariat abandoned it for Round 5. In its place, the Secretariat came up with an interactive PDF version, one that permitted the applicant to enter information on the form (which the Round 4 read-only PDF version did not do) and that

had a lot of built-in intelligence.

Unfortunately, the Secretariat did not allow sufficient lead-time for the development of the PDF version. In fact, the PDF version was not even available until a full month after the call for proposals was issued (while Secretariat staff scrambled to remove all the bugs). The end result was a form that was not very user-friendly and that was difficult to navigate. The Secretariat produced an instructions document for the PDF version that itself was over 50 pages long and difficult to follow.

Examples of the problems applicants experienced with the PDF version included the following:

- Because of the size of the file or the instability of the program, or both, the program would freeze on many computers, often resulting in the loss of data.
- Sections that were supposed to expand to accommodate more data either would not expand or would cause the font to shrink to a ridiculously small size.
- It was difficult to enter data for more than one Principal Recipient (PR); sometimes the program only retained data for the first PR.
- The form was not very flexible. Many sections were not designed to accommodate additional data. To add some information beyond what the instructions called for, the applicant was forced to attach an annex.

There were also inconsistencies between the PDF version and the Word version. (There were only two versions of the applications form available in Round 5: the PDF version and the Word version.)

The problems led Aidspan to recommend (in The Aidspan Guide to Round 5 Applications to the Global Fund) that applicants not use the PDF version unless they had people on their team with considerable expertise using computer software programs, or unless they were prepared to spend a lot of time on the phone talking to the support people in the Secretariat.

Of the 168 proposals submitted in Round 5, only five used the PDF version of the proposal form.

Recommendation: A PDF version of the applications form (or something similar) has the potential to save both applicants and the Secretariat time and energy (because of the form's built-in intelligence). But the first rule for any proposal form is that it must be easy for applicants to use. If the Secretariat is planning to provide a PDF version of the applications form for Round 6, it should (a) keep it simple and (b) develop and field test the form well in advance of the call for proposals. If any new form has not been fully developed and tested in time, then it should not be used for Round 6.

Challenge 2: The applications form is still overly long and complex.

Although the Word version of the Round 5 applications form was much easier to use than the PDF version, the applications form itself was too long and complicated, and contained questions that were ambiguous. These were the same problems that we identified in Round 4, though it must be said that the Round 5 version of the applications form was an improvement over previous versions.

The Word version of the Round 5 Proposal Form is 31 pages long, not including the informational annexes. While it is true that no single applicant had to complete all parts of the form, it was still considerably harder to fill in the form than it would be to complete a fairly sophisticated tax return.

Examples of the problems applicants encountered when filling out the Word version included the following:

- Instructions were sometimes confusing.
- There were discrepancies between the instructions on the applications form and the guidance provided in the Guidelines for Proposals.

- It was not clear how to enter data when there were multiple PRs.
- It was not clear how to enter data for multiple countries (for proposals covering more than one country).
- Checking a box was a very convoluted procedure.

Recommendation: We think that the Secretariat should continue to offer a Word version of the application form even if more sophisticated versions are developed for future rounds. However, the Secretariat should make the form simpler, clearer and easier to use. The Secretariat should design and field test a new Word version of the applications form well in advance of the call for proposals for Round 6. The Secretariat should also formally evaluate the Word version (and other versions) after each round of funding is completed.

Challenge 3: There was confusion concerning what was required for the new Health Systems Strengthening component.

Round 5 was the first time that applicants could submit a component on Health Systems Strengthening. Unfortunately, it was assumed that relatively minor modifications to the components section of the proposal form were all that was necessary to accommodate this change. But it was not as simple as that. The health systems component is quite different from the disease-specific components. Some of the questions in the first few sections of the proposal form made sense in the context of the various disease-specific components, but not in the context of health systems strengthening. Perhaps a separate proposal form for Health Systems Strengthening would have made more sense. Again, the lesson here is that the proposal form needs to be designed and tested well in advance of the call for proposals.

In addition, the guidance concerning the new Health Systems Strengthening component provided by the Global Fund was limited and should have been improved. Applicants were confused, for example, about whether all activities designed to strengthen health systems had to be included in a health systems strengthening component, or whether they could still be included in a disease-specific component.

Challenge 4: There was insufficient time during the applications window to both design a project and complete the applications process.

The applications window stretches from the time the call is made to the date the application has to be submitted. In Round 5, this window lasted about 12 weeks.

Many applicants found that this was not enough time. One of main reasons for this is that applicants wait until the call for proposals before designing the project or projects that they would like to have funded. Designing a project is a time-consuming process. There is usually not enough time in a 12-week period to both design a project from scratch AND complete the application (including obtaining the necessary approvals and signatures). The problem is made more acute by the practice (which we endorse) of having CCMs solicit mini-proposals from interested stakeholders in-country before putting together their applications. The solicitations process alone takes considerable time.

However, there would be enough time in a 12-week period to put the finishing touches to a project that had already been designed, and to complete the application. Ideally, therefore, applicants should have their projects ready by the time is a call is issued. Unfortunately, this happens only rarely.

Recommendation: Potential applicants should be designing their projects well in advance of the call for proposals. The Global Fund Secretariat should actively encourage this practice. One way of doing this would be for the Secretariat to issue an alert three or four months prior to a call for proposals beingissued. The alert would not only announce that a call is imminent, but would also encourage potentialapplicants to start the process of designing their projects.

[David Garmaise ([garmaise@aidspan.org](mailto:garmaise@aidspan.org)), Aidspan's Senior Analyst, is author of several Aidspan Guides .]

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