



Independent observer
of the Global Fund

A BOARD IN SEARCH OF A CHAIR

No Global Fund board meeting would be complete without there being at least one issue involving high drama. This time, the drama arose over the inability of the board to elect a new Chair.

The board's bylaws specify that a new Chair and Vice-Chair must be elected every two years. On this occasion, the Chair was to be from the "implementing block" (that is, from the seven board members who represent developing country governments, plus the two who represent NGOs, plus the one who represents people living with or affected by the three diseases), and the Vice-Chair was to be from the "donor block" (that is, from the eight board members who represent governments that are major donors to the Fund, plus the one who represents the private sector, plus the one who represents foundations).

As with all important board decisions, the vote had to be approved by at least two thirds of the board members from each of the two blocks. However, the board failed to agree on who would be the new Chair, so the current Chair (Rajat Gupta, who represents the private sector) and Vice-Chair (Liz Mataka, who represents developing country NGOs) were asked to stay in office until a new election takes place some time before July 15.

The primary cause of the difficulties, but not the only one, resided in one of the Fund's bylaws, which specifies that the Chair and Vice-Chair have to be elected not just by the board members, but from among the current board members. Thus, if a candidate is being considered who is not a board member, that person has to be made a board member for five minutes before they can then be elected Chair. And that, in turn, requires a current board member to stand down – which is not a trivial matter, when in many cases a board member represents multiple countries.

"Mr. A," a government minister from a developing country who is not a board member and was not present at the meeting, was nominated by the board member who represents the group of countries that includes

Mr. A's country. However, there was a problem; although Mr. A is widely respected for his skills, his experience, his understanding of Global Fund issues, and his commitment, he serves as a minister in a government that is not famed for its respect for civil liberties. To make things worse, when he was informally interviewed by some board members via video-conference, he left a number of members unexcited, if not unhappy, by what he had to say. As a result, it appeared that only a minority of the "implementing block" board members were prepared to vote for him. This was not good enough: it seemed unlikely that Mr. A would be able to obtain a "double two-thirds majority", and anyway, everyone was very anxious to find a Chair who could be supported by all.

It then became known that "Mr. B," a government minister from another developing country, who had the advantage of already being a board member, would be willing to stand – but not if the vote was contested. But Mr. A did not withdraw his candidacy, so Mr. B was not prepared to have his name put forward.

Finally, word spread that another developing country wished to propose "Mr. C," one of its ministers, who, like Mr. A was not a board member and was not present at the meeting. However, Mr. C's potential candidacy encountered even more problems, because he could only stand if the board member who currently represents the group of countries that includes Mr. C's country was willing to make way for Mr. C. But the board member in question was not prepared to stand down, apparently because he had not been consulted on the matter during the period leading up to the election, and perhaps also because (are you still with me?) he had already pledged his support to Mr. A.

So it was a mess. Maybe there could have been an acceptable result if Mr. A had handled the video interview more effectively, or if Mr. A had seen the writing on the wall and withdrawn his candidacy to make way for Mr. B, or if Mr. C had prepared his candidacy more effectively, or if the Board had recognized (as some had been urging for years) that the bylaws are too restrictive and need to be changed. But none of these things happened, and the board found itself in a complex trap from which it could not escape.

The Global Fund is a little over seven years old. In most ways it is, by now, hugely experienced and effective; but in others, it is still learning its way.

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