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Assessment of the Proposal Development and Review Process of the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria:

Assessment Report

*David Wilkinson, Ruairi Brugha, Sean Hewitt,
Birna Trap, Janie Eriksen, Lasse Nielsen, Wolfgang Weber*

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and Malaria

Submitted by:
Euro Health Group, Denmark



Tinghøjvej 77
DK 2860 Søborg
Phone: (+45) 3969 6888
Fax: (+45) 3969 5888
email: eurohealth@ehg.dk
internet: www.ehg.dk

Executive Summary

The Global Fund has commissioned an independent assessment of the process through which proposals are developed, submitted, subjected to a technical review and then sent to the Global Fund Board. The assessment will be used by The Global Fund to strengthen and refine the proposal development and review process.

The assessment was conducted by Euro Health Group, at global level through in-depth telephone interviews with key informants and observation of the Round 5 TRP review, and at country level through visits to five purposively selected countries in Africa and Asia, supplemented by telephone interviews with key informants in two Latin American countries.

This report outlines the study methodology, and presents the assessment findings and recommendations, which are clustered into four broad categories:

1. Improving communications and clarifying Global Fund principles, policies and procedures;
2. Improving country ownership, donor harmonization and Global Fund alignment with national systems;
3. Strengthening and supporting the technical review process;
4. Using technical assistance and partnerships to improve the country proposal development process.

The major recommendations for action by The Global Fund for each of these clusters are highlighted below:

1. Improving communications.

A key finding in this assessment was that communications related to proposal development and review were sometimes sub-optimal, and a number of areas were identified in which communications can be improved: - between the Global Fund and the CCM; within the CCM; and between the CCM and its in-country stakeholders.

- The Global Fund should develop and implement a comprehensive communications strategy to address misconceptions and clarify policies and principles.
- An improved communications strategy could utilize the regional 'Roadshow' model, piloted by Global Fund and technical partners; and also draw on experience from regional CCM workshops. This would both help the Global Fund to clarify issues and remedy misconceptions, and also provide an opportunity for the Global Fund to listen to and address the concerns of its country partners.
- The Global Fund should provide targeted emails to all known country partners, alerting countries three months in advance of upcoming rounds, and use partners as messengers to improve message dissemination – especially to civil society and the private sector.
- Global Fund should develop and disseminate a proposal preparation 'road-map' highlighting the use of Guidelines, milestones, realistic timeframes, workplan development, methods to engage a broad range of stakeholders, and country-level priority setting strategies.

2. Improving country ownership, donor harmonization and Global Fund alignment with national systems.

Countries need to be supported by technical agencies and donors to have coherent national plans in place; and then to be able to demonstrate how Fund support will be used to implement these plans. However, country level data continue to be poor, because of lack of country ownership and because efforts to improve data are externally driven. The Assessment revealed that weak CCM governance and functioning are critical factors inhibiting the success of CCM proposal preparation and submission.

The Assessment noted concerns that the GF system of “rounds” is geared to supporting discrete projects rather than strategic programmes, is undermining coordinated approaches such as SWAps, and is a major source of disharmony for national planning, implementation, monitoring and reporting systems. It was noted that there are persistent high transaction costs associated with receiving Fund support, including reallocation of human resources from other programmes or sub-programmes.

The following recommendations are proposed to address the issues outlined above:

- Building on the results of the CCM assessment conducted in 2005, mechanisms should be explored to strengthen the meaningful involvement of civil society and private sector in CCM processes. Annual self-assessments and external sample audits of CCM functioning should be conducted regularly, with a focus on Board-approved eligibility requirements and recommendations.
- Countries should be encouraged to align CCMs with appropriate existing national structures, where these are functional.
- Ensure integration with existing initiatives i.e. the ‘Three Ones’, Global Task Team (GTT) report, OECD/DAC Paris 2005 Declaration, and similar initiatives. UNAIDS is currently developing a checklist for the assessment of national strategic plans, which could be dovetailed with Global Fund proposal development and evaluation processes.
- Encourage donor consensus in the development and use of common country assessments in the development and evaluation of proposals for funding disease control activities.
- Technical partners should develop tools and indicators to assist countries in assessing their strengths and weaknesses in systems capacity in order to appropriately focus proposal development towards filling gaps. Strategies to strengthen the health system should include public and private sectors.
- Grant agreements should include the establishment of baseline data within the first year work-plan. It is essential that technical partners assist countries to identify strengths and weaknesses in current M&E and health information systems.
- The Global Fund encourages coordination with and integration into comprehensive national plans that include all sectors of society. It is recommended that the TRP considers to what extent proposals are coherent with or inform the development of such plans, as a major factor in its decision-making.

- Building on the experience of existing Global Fund investment in SWAp and budget support situations, the Global Fund should develop forms and Guidelines for CCMs to use to adapt Global Fund approaches to these financing mechanisms.
- The findings of this study support the need for the strategic review to address the questions of merging grants and adopting a rolling cycle approach, which are already on the agenda of the Board Policy and Strategy committee. The outcome of these reviews may have a major impact requiring the redesign of many of the processes, guidelines and tools for proposal preparation, TRP review and grant negotiation.

3. Strengthening and supporting the technical review process.

Secretariat screening and clarification, and TRP feedback were largely seen as helpful, appropriate and constructive, and as having improved over successive rounds. However, many in-country stakeholders had either never seen TRP comments, or were unaware of the weight that the TRP places on proposals addressing previous TRP comments.

Round 5 saw an increase in useful information which the Secretariat prepared for the TRP, covering country context and capacity for scaling up. This process of collating relevant and standardized country information, in advance of the TRP review meeting, could further improve TRP decision-making in Round 6, as long as care is taken not to overburden the TRP with information.

The Assessment Team and Advisory Panel commend the TRP and Secretariat for the quality of their self assessment process and subsequent report.

- The Assessment Team and the Evaluation Advisory Panel strongly recommend that the Board specifically requests the Portfolio Committee to follow up and act on issues highlighted in the *Report of the Technical Review Panel and the Secretariat on Round 5 Proposals*.
- It is recommended that the Secretariat establishes a firm deadline for clarifications on proposals to be completed.
- In addition to recommendations made in the *Report of the Technical Review Panel and the Secretariat on Round 5 Proposals* on TRP composition, it is recommended to the Portfolio Committee and the Board that the TRP composition is strengthened in the area of expertise in programme implementation in recipient countries.
- TRP comments on category 3 proposals should be more comprehensive to guide the learning process for resubmissions. Guidelines should emphasize that countries re-submitting category 3 proposals should specifically address TRP comments from previous rounds.
- TRP review should be enhanced by providing standardized, structured, contextual country information, including indicators related to country implementation capacity. The Global Fund should explore with technical partners the possibility for Round 6 of compiling information packs for TRP that contain cross-country comparable information on applicant country contexts.
- While the Assessment Team and the Advisory Panel commend the TRP on their self-assessment methods, it is recommended that the TRP conducts an internal self-audit as a form of internal quality assurance.

4. Using technical assistance and partnerships to improve the country proposal development process.

Stakeholders in all the countries visited noted that the provision of technical assistance had been essential in the proposal development process, particularly in strategic programme development, transforming concepts into Global Fund format, and quality assurance of the completed proposal. This Assessment also highlighted the importance of technical assistance in ensuring successful programme implementation. The assessment revealed that the quality of TA support to countries is uneven, and that NGOs and non-health ministries are severely disadvantaged in accessing TA, generally having neither the knowledge nor the financial support to provide such access.

- It is recommended that the Guidelines clarify that technical assistance can be sought, not only related to disease expertise but also where strategic and/or programme management expertise are required. The Guidelines should further highlight the importance of continuity in technical assistance into the implementation phase, and the need to build this into the proposal and budget.
- Previous coordinated interventions from technical partners have had some success in countries with a history of repeated failure. Based on this experience, it is recommended that such countries are referred to GIST (or GIST-type assistance for non-HIV proposals) to examine and make recommendations for that country in preparation for new proposal rounds.
- The Secretariat should provide a link on its website to the *The Aidspan Guide to Obtaining Global Fund-Related Technical Assistance*, and other TA guides.

The Global Fund Framework Document notes that “*technical support for preparing proposals and developing country level partnerships could be provided and funded by partners active in the country, such as bilateral donors and UN organizations*”.

However, if the Fund is to rely on country partners to support the development and subsequent implementation of high quality proposals, there is a need for significant investment in forging and sustaining more effective relationships with these partners.