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TECHNICAL REVIEW PANEL (TRP) LESSONS LEARNED REPORT ON THE GLOBAL FUND'S NATIONAL STRATEGY APPLICATION (NSA) FIRST LEARNING WAVE (FLW)

Technical Review Panel (TRP) Lessons Learned Report on the Global Fund's National Strategy Application (NSA) First Learning Wave (FLW)

Executive Summary

The TRP participated extensively in all stages of the FLW including its design, the desk review of strategies, country visits and the review of submitted NSAs. Lessons learned were gathered at each stage of the process. This report presents these lessons learned with a view to informing a future broader roll-out of the NSA process.

Key lessons learned from the TRP regarding the overall NSA FLW process include the following:

- The TRP concludes, based upon its review of disease strategies and review of proposals submitted under the NSA FLW process, that this is a promising new funding strategy for the Global Fund that has many advantages.
- A GF financing window focusing on NSAs is likely to have a positive effect on the quality of national disease control strategies. Strategy development is a lengthy process and should not be 'rushed' in order to establish eligibility for a national strategy application. Ideally, the application process should be flexible enough to adapt to the timing of national strategy cycles rather than be forced into a fixed window period.
- Country visits are an essential step of a National Strategy Application process for both the reviewers and applicants. They should be conducted by teams of independent experts, some of whom should be recruited within the country, with stringent selection procedures that will avoid conflict of interest. National and international experts should be equally eligible, based upon clear criteria.
- There is a need to clearly define the roles and responsibilities of the CCMs in the development or endorsement of national strategies, in the National Strategy Application process and in national strategy grant management. There are potential areas of conflict between the roles of national disease control programmes and the CCMs.
- The strategy assessment tool developed by IHP+ and modified by the Global Fund was a valuable support to ensure the completeness and comparability of reviews. However there are some attributes, in particular that of multi-stakeholder involvement, which cannot be adequately assessed in a desk review. Assessments of these attributes require a country visit.
- The National Strategy Application form and guidance documents will require further revision to assure that the proposals include sufficient detail to permit evaluation of the national strategy and application request, and to assure that essential documents such as budgets and work plans are submitted in a format that can be consistently evaluated.
- The shift from project funding to programme support is complex and will require attention at each stage. Unless grants funded through the national strategy funding stream are managed using more aligned and consolidated grant management

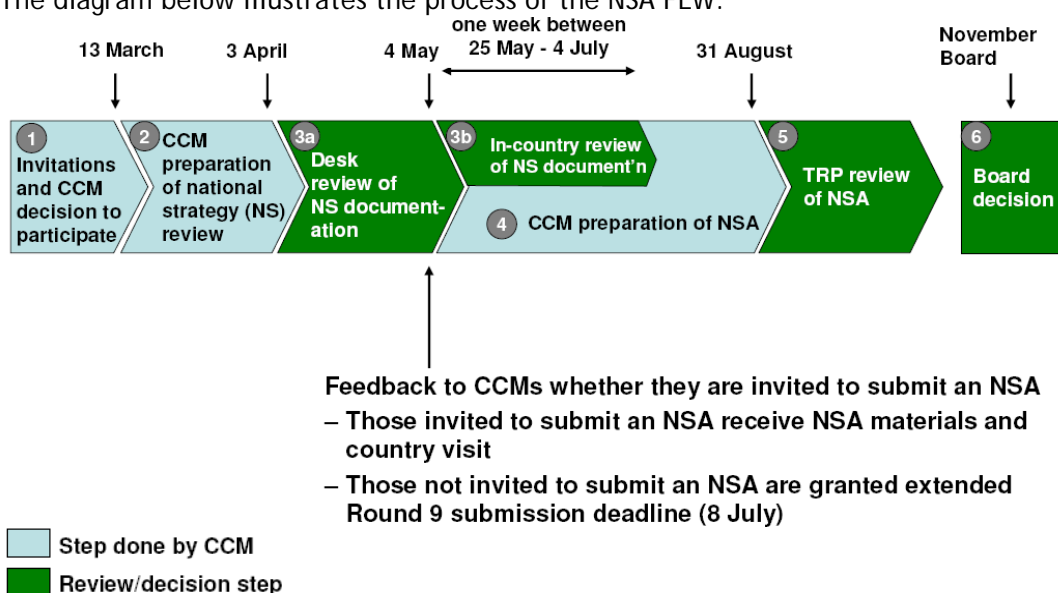
processes, it will likely lead to grants that are substantively unchanged from current Global Fund rounds based grants. This would limit the innovation promised by the NSA process.

For ease of reference, a summary of high-level lessons learnt are presented throughout the report in the blue boxes.

Background

As part of its commitment to aid effectiveness principles, and in response to country requests for streamlined processes, the Global Fund introduced a new mechanism to apply for Global Fund resources - known as "National Strategy Applications" (NSAs). This involves using a national strategy rather than a Global Fund-specific proposal as the primary basis of application for Global Fund financing.

The diagram below illustrates the process of the NSA FLW:



The Board at its Eighteenth Meeting decided to introduce NSAs through a phased roll-out, beginning in 2009 with a "First Learning Wave" (FLW) (GF/B18/DP20). The aim of this FLW of NSAs was to draw policy and operational lessons to guide the broader roll-out of the new application procedure beyond 2009.

This report seeks to provide feedback and give lessons learned from the Technical Review Panel (TRP) members who participated in the NSA FLW.

Stages of TRP participation in the First Learning Wave of the National Strategy Application process

The TRP participated extensively in the First Learning Wave of the National Strategy Application process:

- The TRP chair and two nominated TRP members participated in the design of the First Learning Wave. They reviewed forms designed for the various stages of the process, discussed selection criteria, and performed a mock review of a national tuberculosis strategy to test the utility of the IHP+ attributes, review parameters, and instruments.

- A group of 20 TRP members performed a desk review of 20 disease strategies and supporting documents that were submitted by 19 Country Coordinating Mechanisms in response to an invitation by the Global Fund. The purpose of this desk review was to decide whether the strategy was sufficiently robust to form the basis of a formal National Strategy Application. On the basis of the documentation available, eight strategies were selected as being sufficiently robust to serve as the basis of a National Strategy Application. For those eight selected strategies, the TRP review identified strengths, weaknesses, and areas for clarification.
- The same group of 20 TRP members conducted follow-up in-country visits to review the eight strategies that were selected. These in-country visits aimed at further understanding the strategy context and served to clarify issues identified during the desk review. The missions were conducted by teams of six to eight experts, half of them TRP members, the other half appointed by the Country Coordinating Mechanisms. Members of the Global Fund Secretariat and in some cases staff of technical partner organisations joined the visits as observers.
- Following these visits, seven National Strategy Applications were submitted for consideration for funding. They were reviewed by a panel of 15 TRP members who made funding recommendations based on technical soundness to the Board of the Global Fund. To minimise potential conflicts of interest, the applications were reviewed by TRP members who had not participated in the desk review and/or country visit related to the strategy on which the application was based.
- During each step of the process, the TRP annotated lessons that would benefit future iterations of NSA review.

Overall this process involved the TRP more closely than usual in the development of the grant and proposal architecture. In addition, the desk review of the strategies and the follow-up country visits allowed the TRP's feedback on the national strategies to be taken into account immediately prior to submission of the actual NSA. This is in contrast to the usual rounds-based application process, where TRP feedback is only available for the next application round.

The TRP was chosen for this task during the First Learning Wave because it is uniquely placed to understand the opportunities and limits of document review, as well as the additive benefit from country visits to augment those limitations. The TRP was available and the members had the necessary mix of skills. However it should be recognised that the TRP was not originally constituted for this task and prior selection of TRP members had not been carried out with criteria in mind regarding skills for in-country visits and review. Overall, however, it was felt that drawing on the strengths of the TRP was both appropriate and sufficient to test the model at this pilot stage.

Throughout the First Learning Wave, the same TRP members participated in steps 3a, 3b and 5 of the above diagram with only minor changes. This challenged the architecture of the process in the following ways:

- The involvement of TRP members in the initial strategy assessment and feedback, as well as the follow-up country visit and debriefing of the CCM moved them closer than ever before to the in-country process of proposal development. For a body whose main task is the independent review of proposals, this created a potential source of conflict of interest.
- The TRP has classically functioned in anonymity, carefully protecting the identity of reviewers from the applicants. This could not be maintained during the country visits.

These challenges were met by a number of mitigating measures of varying effectiveness: TRP members were given the guidance to not provide technical advice during the country reviews, i.e. to point out only *what* needs fixing, but not *how* it should be fixed. The most

important decision was to exclude TRP members who had reviewed a strategy and/or conducted a country visit from the review and discussion of the resulting National Strategy Application. The reasons for this decision was to limit subjective views of a proposal that could be created by a sense of personal connection to a strategy or country need, as well as to “protect” the TRP members from direct lobbying by applicants. These measures sought to model the separation between the joint assessment and the NSA review that is foreseen for future review of NSAs. Though written feedback was provided from the strategy reviewers to the application reviewers, this ‘firewall’, of course, also separated those who were most knowledgeable about the strategy from the review of the proposal to fund the strategy.

The participation in the First Learning Wave design process

After a call for expression of interest, two TRP members who had completed several rounds, one disease specialist and one public health generalist, were contracted by the Global Fund Secretariat to participate in the design of the First Learning Wave of the National Strategy Application. The participation included reviews of draft assessment tools and application forms, the mock review of a national strategy to test the assessment instruments and the feasibility of the approach, and two meetings in Geneva as well as several telephone conferences to discuss practical aspects of the process. A major focus of these consultations was the refinement of a strategy assessment tool, a Global Fund adaptation of the *Joint Assessment of National Strategies* tool developed by the International Health Partnership (IHP+). The tool is a matrix of characteristics and attributes of a sound national strategy that can be used as benchmarks for strategy assessments. The chair of the TRP joined in some of these activities and was copied on all written exchanges.

Although feedback from TRP members after rounds-based reviews has often provided important information for the design of the next round of Global Fund application materials, the level of engagement of TRP members in the development of First Learning Wave procedures and instruments was a new and welcome development. Bringing the reviewers into the design of the review processes and tools seemed like a judicious choice. The signing of service contracts assured the necessary level of availability and engagement in the process.

From the perspective of the Global Fund Secretariat, the participation of TRP members in the process provided a certain “reality check”. It allowed choosing procedural options and developing assessment instruments that were considered to be the most functional by those with first-hand experience in reviewing proposals, in particular through the TRP review process. For the TRP it provided an opportunity to participate in the development of a grant application format and review process at the design stage. This was highly appreciated and preferable to the practice of launching a Global Fund application process, and then soliciting after-the-fact TRP feedback in order to modify it in subsequent application rounds.

Summary of lessons learned:

The participation of the TRP in the design and development phase of Global Fund grant mechanisms and instruments was highly appreciated and resulted in a more effective and inclusive proposal review process. The approach of contracting delegated TRP members for this task works well.

The desk review of national strategies

In conjunction with the desk review of national strategies at a five-day meeting in April 2009, TRP members held a series of group discussions to collect the experience of the review process. The following is a brief summary of the conclusions reached and recommendations made at that stage.

Submitted documentation

The documents submitted differed greatly in terms of appropriateness and in level of operational detail. Some observed patterns were:

- a) Documentation to support budgets and their relationship to national health budgets and the macro-economic frameworks was often weak;
- b) The description of the process of strategy development, especially of non-governmental stakeholders, was generally inadequate;
- c) The issue of sustainability was rarely addressed;
- d) The plans for monitoring and evaluation often lacked detailed descriptions of data collection methods and approaches to data analysis;
- e) The disease control strategies were often not linked to the national health sector strategy, or this link was inadequately described.

The invitation for strategy submission issued to the countries was not sufficiently clear about the level of operational detail required. Some strategy documents were more akin to a policy; others were strategic plans providing a framework for operational planning. Some countries submitted operational plans as part of their strategy documentation.

Reports of recent health and disease specific strategy evaluations were found to be very useful. The TRP felt that these should be mandatory for the submission of a strategy. National strategies or programmes that had not had a recent evaluation should in the future be screened out of the National Strategy Application process. Additional evaluation reports, including Global Fund grant performance reports, reports prepared by financial donor agencies, or reviews carried out in the context of a SWAP would be helpful.

The national strategy desk review

The TRP strategy reviewers noted that when all core documents are submitted, a strategy assessment by means of a desk review to exclude strategies which are not sufficiently robust to serve as the basis of an NSA, is feasible. Additional documentation would be helpful. However, when submissions include large numbers of documents, the volume of documentation may create difficulties for the reviewer, in particular in assessing coherence between disease programme and wider health sector issues.

- The assessment tool developed by IHP+ and adapted by the Global Fund was found to be a suitable framework to determine if a national strategy is sufficiently robust to serve as the basis for a NSA and to ensure the consistency of the review. It supported the review process very well. TRP members made only minor suggestions for changes:
 - The TRP felt that filling out the assessment tool “characteristic by characteristic” (or even by attribute) was considered overly cumbersome and the different desk and country review teams preferred to provide the assessment at the level of the 5 main categories of attributes. The attributes (and their component “characteristics”) were used mainly as a checklist in ensuring a comprehensive standardized review and simplifying the process of drawing conclusions and recommendations.
 - Attributes were seen as a much idealised “perfect best practice”, setting very high standards that are unlikely to be met even in strong national strategies and that need to be interpreted within the local context.

Multi-stakeholder involvement in strategy development is difficult to assess during a desk review and can only be fully assessed during a country visit. While multi stakeholder **endorsement** of a strategy is essential, the TRP questioned whether the multi-sectoral **participation** in strategy development demanded by the Global Fund is always essential in

all social contexts for all types of programmes. National strategy development may be more 'governmental' in process than the CCM processes which are more external to government regarding proposal solicitation and development.

In retrospect, the TRP found that it was not clear to what extent applicants were required to document the relationship of the submitted disease control strategy to the national health sector strategy and to higher level policies, as well as strategies on issues such as poverty reduction, gender equality and child rights. It was also not clear to what extent potential applicants needed to present the relationship of the strategy budget to the overall national budget. The TRP recommended that the Global Fund clarify for applicants and reviewers whether documentation of these relationships are required or just desirable in a national strategy funding proposal.

There was a consensus that, in addition to the criteria which were shared, the more detailed "attributes" of the tool to assess national strategies should be made available to countries, together with an explanation on how to use these parameters in selecting the most appropriate documents for submission. Realistically, these criteria and detailed attributes were not generally available for the national strategies that were developed prior to the NSA process. The TRP was, however, conscious of the risk that this may lead to a mechanistic and bureaucratic process of generating documents designed to meet assessment criteria, while losing the strategic focus on programme outcome and performance.

Beyond the documentation to support the feasibility and quality of the national strategy, the TRP noted that the proposal for funding should include an assessment of risks, primarily to poor and vulnerable populations, but also to social and health systems, and an assessment of programme effectiveness and current performance. In this context the relative lack of detail in current Global Fund grant performance reports was underlined.

Finally, the TRP noted that many of the strategy documents submitted for this desk review were incomplete or submitted in draft form. This was in part due to the very compressed deadlines of the First Learning Wave. In consideration of these circumstances, the TRP accepted several incomplete sets of documents if there was sufficient indication that they could be finalised before the grant application deadline. In retrospect, this decision generated mixed results. It accelerated the process of strategy development in some countries, while others were not able to complete their strategy in time to submit a funding application.

Beyond the desk review and the First Learning Wave

Based on the experience of the desk reviews, TRP members expressed their views regarding the future of national strategy funding by the Global Fund. They noted that during the First Learning Wave, the TRP was acting (with Board authorization) outside its usual terms of reference. If national strategy funding becomes part of the Global Fund architecture, the mandate and terms of reference and the skill set of participating TRP members will have to be reviewed and revised.

Furthermore, the TRP noted that national strategy funding proposals should be demand driven based on criteria of eligibility rather than be generated on an "invitation" basis. The separation of strategy review and proposal review should be maintained, but the strategy review should be a seamless process combining both the desk review and the country visit. The desk review would not require a physical meeting but could be conducted by a group of experts via virtual meetings after independent review. There should be opportunities for clarifications during the desk review and a decision point to proceed or not to proceed with a country visit after a reasonable clarification period. The country visit should be conducted by the same team who performed the desk review.

Summary of lessons learned:

At the time of the desk review, the TRP was of the opinion that not all elements of a national strategy needed to be up to date. It was possible to assess whether there was sufficient evidence available and sufficient momentum in a country's planning ability and in its capacity to develop a robust strategy. However at the final stage of the First Learning Wave, based on the experience of the entire process, the TRP now recommends that in future only countries with finalized or near finalized (i.e., not yet formally adopted) strategies be permitted to submit proposals for national strategy funding.

The strategy assessment tool developed by IHP+ and modified by the Global Fund was a valuable support to ensure the completeness and comparability of reviews. But there are some attributes that cannot be adequately assessed in a desk review. These require a country visit. Based on this finding, the TRP recommended that the desk review and the country visit be combined into a single process mandated to one team of experts that would be able to conduct the document review at their desks, followed by a country visit. The value and validity of the assessment tool was confirmed by the country visits. In the future the IHP+ attributes, including more detailed characteristics, should be shared with applicants in advance of the strategy development process.

The follow-up country visits

Teams of three or four TRP members, joined by an equal number of national experts, conducted follow-up visits for the assessment of eight national strategies in seven countries: China, Kenya, Madagascar, Malawi, Nepal, Rwanda¹ and Vietnam. Each team, supported by observers from the Global Fund Secretariat and sometimes also from partner agencies, prepared a report of lessons learned. These reports are extensive, very detailed and specific to the country visited. There are, however, a number of generic lessons and observations.

The TRP members were unanimous in their opinion that the country visits were an essential and necessary step of the National Strategy Application process. The teams cited different reasons to support this opinion. They invoked both the positive impact of the missions on the national strategy development processes, and their essential role of providing first-hand contextual information for strategy assessment. TRP members who participated in country visits were generally clear that the visits were for information gathering and additional understanding of the country context and strategy, and not an evaluation of the disease programme. This distinction between application and programme evaluation will likely need to be reinforced in future country visits. The teams felt that in order to achieve a clearer separation between the strategy review and the funding application, the decision to accept a National Strategy Application should be contingent on both a successful desk review and country visit.

The TRP teams commented extensively on the participation of "national facilitators" who made an essential contribution to the success of the visits. Many comments concerned the apparent conflict of interest of those national facilitators who were also CCM members. There was a general consensus that CCM members should be excluded from participating in country strategy assessment teams. Other comments addressed the dichotomy between the key role of the national experts in the assessment process and their position as facilitators rather than members of the team. To solve this, TRP members suggested that future assessments should be performed by balanced teams of independent experts chosen from within and from outside the country without assigning different status to international and national experts.

In most countries included in the visits, the invitation to apply for national strategy funding acted as a catalyst, accelerating the process of rigorous and participatory strategic planning. It was credited with improvements in the disease control strategy and with increasing

¹ Two national strategies, HIV and tuberculosis, were assessed in Rwanda.

political commitment to the disease response. At the same time, the short deadlines of the First Learning Wave did sometimes force the planning process into a time table that was too tight to permit the desired level of consultations. Two reports suggested that the timing of future strategy funding windows by the Global Fund should be flexible to adapt themselves to the national planning cycles of the applicants rather than be organised in time-bound cycles of application rounds.

In several countries, the National Strategy Application process created some uncertainty in the institutional role of the CCM. While the leadership of the CCM in the rounds-based grant applications and in the governance of the grants is generally undisputed, the disease control programmes or National AIDS Commissions at governmental levels are firmly in charge of national strategy development. The participation of the CCMs in this process varied from country to country, but in some countries it was observed to be quite low. In these cases conflicts of authority may arise when the signature of a national strategy grant confers the oversight of the grant to the CCM while the oversight of the strategy itself rests with the disease control programme. This may require a review of the terms of reference and mandates of the CCMs.

The National Strategy Application process has, in a number of countries, contributed to a greater involvement of civil society in strategy development. However the country visits found highly variable involvement of civil society in the development of national strategies, though generally the CCM structure provided an opportunity for comment as well as eventual endorsement of national strategies. Further discussion is warranted regarding the appropriate and/or required roles for civil society in national strategy development in order for a national program to be eligible for funding under the framework of NSA.

Several TRP teams observed that the invitation to participate in the First Learning Wave of National Strategy Applications was interpreted by some CCMs as an offer to engage in a Global Fund grant application with higher financial value. In some countries, there was an observed tendency to develop strategies responding to IHP+ attributes and Global Fund policies, sometimes overriding considerations of national specificity. National strategies should be specific to the country disease burden and cultural context and not written in a pro forma way aimed specifically at Global Fund funding. The greatest risk of the national strategy grant process is that it may end up in a grant that is only distinguishable from regular Global Fund grants by its name.

Related to this is the issue of grant consolidation. Several of the TRP teams found that countries had established distinct management units to manage Global Fund grants obtained in different rounds. The TRP considered that the main anticipated added value of a national strategy grant is a fundamental change in management, moving from project management to management at the programme level by providing financial support to a portfolio of activities developed under the strategy. However this will only be achieved if all existing Global Fund grants are consolidated under the same mechanism. A move to programme funding will also require the Global Fund to increase focus on national program performance including putting emphasis on outcomes and impact achieved

Programme, rather than project financing, requires joint programme monitoring and oversight. While a project has a defined set of deliverables, a programme has to continuously remain responsive to changing environmental factors. Unless the Global Fund has absolute confidence that a national disease control programme will always make the most rational decision based on the best evidence, the programme priorities and activities need to be subject to regular reviews and a joint approval process similar to a Sector-Wide Approach (SWAP) mechanism. The increasing reliance on national reporting and reviews (including joint partner reviews) would require more flexibility on the part of the Global Fund and possibly create a need for a much more substantive country presence for both financial and technical review than is presently provided by the Local Fund Agents. The implication is

that effective national strategy funding will at least require a fundamental review of the profiles and terms of reference of Local Fund Agents.

On the question whether the national strategy funding process that was followed for the First Learning Wave could be applied to the wider funding of broader health sector strategies, the TRP teams reacted with caution. Funding a national health strategy would require a highly interactive and participatory in-country grant management mechanism, something for which the Global Fund in its current form is structurally unfit. One team noted that once sufficient experience in managing national disease strategy grants is gained by the Global Fund and by country-level partners, the funding of health sector strategies could be considered. Eligible countries could be those that have a track record in successful management of two or more disease strategy grants.

Summary of lessons learned:

Country visits are an essential step of a National Strategy Application process for the reviewers and for the applicants. They should be conducted by teams of independent experts, some of whom recruited within the country under strict rules to avoid conflicts of interest. There should be no distinction in status between national and international experts.

A strategy financing window is likely to have a positive effect on the quality of national disease control strategies. However the time required for strategy development should be taken into consideration. Ideally, the application process should be flexible enough to adapt to the timing of national strategy cycles rather be forced into a fixed window period.

There is a need to clearly define the roles and responsibilities of the CCMs in the National Strategy Application process and in national strategy grant management. There are potential areas of conflict between the roles of national disease control programmes and the roles of the CCMs. Further discussion is warranted regarding the appropriate and/or required roles for civil society in national strategy development in order for a national program to be eligible for funding under the framework of NSA.

The greatest risk to the national strategy funding stream is that it may end up in grants that are substantively unchanged from current Global Fund grants. The shift from project funding to programme support is complex and will require attention at each stage. It will also require a consolidation of all active grants to the same disease in the country, and a change in the way grants are monitored. For this purpose the profiles and terms of reference of Local Fund Agents will need to be reviewed.

It is too early to assess the possibility of developing a Global Fund window for funding national health sector strategies. Such an initiative will face the same types of challenges as the funding of national disease strategies, but at a much higher level of complexity. It should not be considered until there is a track record of successful national disease strategy funding.

The post-country visit strategy review

Following the country visits, several countries reviewed and revised their national strategies, in part in response to comments received from the country visit teams, in part due to the fact that the documentation was still incomplete at the time of the country visits.

For the TRP this presented a challenge because some changes were substantive enough to invalidate prior comments on the strategies. It therefore became necessary to schedule an additional process, a desk review of changes in the strategic documentation made between the time of the country visit and the submission of the National Strategy Application. The desk reviews were performed by the TRP country visit teams conferencing via the telephone and e-mail.

This experience re-enforced the lessons that (a) it is difficult to deal with uncompleted strategies in the strategy application process; and (b) the strategy assessment process

should be interactive but it should also be completed before a green light is given for the submission of a National Strategy Application. These lessons are already summarised under previous headings.

The national strategy proposal review

The national strategy funding proposals were reviewed by a panel of 15 TRP members in October 2009. All but one of the panel members had participated in the strategy assessments.² The reviewers of each proposal, however, were chosen among those panel members who had neither participated in the desk review, nor in the visit to the country of the CCM applicant.

Preceding the review, the team leader of the country visit presented an outline of the strategy assessment findings. Following the review, the reviewers had an opportunity in plenary to direct queries towards those members of the TRP who conducted the strategy assessment. However when the discussion turned to the assessment of the National Strategy Application and when recommendations for funding were discussed, the strategy assessment team left the room.

In practice, this process worked less well than planned. According to the plan, the grant proposal reviewers were meant to reach their funding recommendation on the basis of reading the application documents plus the strategy assessment reports of their TRP colleagues. The strategy documentation was available at the meeting, but it was extensive, and it was intended this documentation should be used only for the occasional cross-check of information. The information contained in the application form, on the other hand, was deliberately sparse, primarily in consideration of the applicants and secondly, as the strategy had already undergone a robust assessment, so only core information was requested in the NSA.

As a consequence, the National Strategy Application review teams needed to refer repeatedly to the strategy documents. The insights of the country visit team were very useful to the grant proposal evaluators. This did diminish the firewall between the strategy review and the proposal review. However, too rigid a firewall between the strategy review team and the application reviewers in the case of this first instance of the NSA process would have hindered a successful review process.

This experience helped crystallise a long-standing discussion within the TRP about its level of involvement in the strategy assessment and about the type of firewall that was necessary between the strategy assessment and the proposal review. The consensus that emerged from this discussion for future National Strategy Application rounds was that (a) at least one former member of the TRP should participate in the strategy assessment (desk review and country visit) in order to assure the information needs of the TRP are fully taken into consideration; and that (b) the team leader of the strategy assessment team should be available throughout the review of the national strategy funding proposal in order to answer questions related to the strategy.

Regarding the format of the national strategy funding proposal, the greatest problems for the TRP reviewers were related to the formats of the budgets and programme expenditure frameworks. As the strategies are national documents, the budgets were formatted to meet national requirements. Some of these formats differed significantly from the usual budget formats reviewed by the TRP. One of them was only readable in electronic form. In theory, the engagement of the Global Fund in support of a national strategy should mean that all institutions of the Global Fund, including the TRP, adapt their procedures and demands to the internal national logic of the strategy. However, if this logic prevents the assessment of a key document like the budget, the TRP cannot do its job. Finding the optimal point on the

² The one member who had not participated in the strategy assessment received a thorough briefing on the process.

scale between acceptance of national autonomy of planning, and need for inter-country uniformity of documentation and presentation is an area that will require further discussions.

Despite these as yet unresolved discussions about the National Strategy Application process, the TRP strongly endorsed the approach. Developing a grant on the basis of a national strategy was seen as a more integrated, more comprehensive and more sustainable offer of financial support than the standard rounds-based funding. The fact that the process allowed a dialogue with the countries was highly appreciated by the TRP. Members felt that it helped them greatly to reach a decision on funding recommendation, even if they realised that the involvement of the TRP in the strategy assessment was a temporary measure that may not be repeated.

The role of health systems strengthening in National Strategy Applications

Two applicants submitted a proposal for the funding of cross-cutting health systems strengthening activities together with their national strategy funding proposal. These were reviewed by the TRP as part of the disease-specific National Strategy Application review.

Some disease-specific program strategies included a discussion of the health sector implications of the proposed activities, and included measures to provide the necessary health sector support for implementation of the disease strategy. The two cross-cutting health systems strengthening sections, however, appeared to have little relationship to the disease strategy that they accompanied. They were presented as a menu of activities to be supported by the Global Fund with very limited explanation as to how they tied into a strategic vision to improve the response to AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis in the country. The sections were add-ons without a clear explanation on how they would produce the types of systemic changes necessary to support effective disease control programming. The TRP did not recommend that they be funded and stated that the cross-cutting health systems strengthening section in its current form is not appropriate to be reviewed together with an NSA based on a disease specific strategy. Further discussions on how to improve these cross cutting health systems strengthening sections for the purpose of an NSA are needed.

Summary of lessons learned:

Based on the TRP experience of involvement in assessing national disease response strategies for AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria and reviewing proposals for strategic programme support, the TRP concludes that this is a promising new funding strategy for the Global Fund that has many advantages.

The link between the activities of strategy assessment and proposal review still requires further work. Based on current experience, the TRP recommends that (a) at least one former TRP member participate in the strategy assessment, and (b) the leader of the strategy assessment team be available throughout the proposal review process to answer questions about the strategy

The National Strategy Application forms will require further work to assure that the proposals include sufficient detail to evaluate them, and to assure that essential documents such as budgets are submitted in a form that can be evaluated. This has to be done with caution in order not to add more complexity to an already complex application process.

Based on the review of two health systems strengthening proposals submitted as sections of national strategy funding proposals, the TRP stated that the cross-cutting health systems strengthening section in its current form is not appropriate to be reviewed together with an NSA. Further discussions on how to improve these cross cutting health systems strengthening sections for the purpose of an NSA are needed.