Evaluation Brief

Evaluation of Community Engagement in the Global Fund Grant Cycle

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Evaluation Briefs are produced by the Global Fund's Evaluation and Learning Office to synthesize the key learnings and takeaways formulated in independent evaluations.

This evaluation brief is a high-level summary of the documents developed for the Evaluation of Community Engagement in the Global Fund Grant Cycle https://www.theglobalfund.org/en/iel/evaluations/2024-07-05-evaluation-of-community-engagement-ce-in-the-global-fund-grant-cycle/, including:

- The Evaluation Report
- The Independent Evaluation Panel Commentary
- The Secretariat Management Response

For a more complete view of the evaluation, the final evaluation documents can be accessed individually through the above links.

This independent evaluation was managed by the Evaluation and Learning Office of the Global Fund and conducted by Itad. The evaluation was conducted under the oversight of the Global Fund Independent Evaluation Panel (IEP).

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Introduction

The Global Fund's 2023–2028 Strategy puts communities at the heart of its mission. It emphasizes the importance of community engagement as a key driver of better health outcomes for HIV, tuberculosis, malaria, stronger health systems, and pandemic preparedness. Since its foundation, the Global Fund has recognized the critical role of communities and has supported community leadership across its governance, implementation, accountability, and advocacy structures. This evaluation defines meaningful community engagement (CE) as the process where the role of communities is consistently and continuously acknowledged in decision making and processes, and where communities' unique expertise, perspectives and lived experience are sought and valued. The Global Fund's 2023–28 Strategy[1] prioritizes CE for better health outcomes and mandates[2] that funding requests place communities at the center, recognizing their role in effective program design and implementation.[3][4]

The Global Fund has been supporting community engagement through a dedicated Strategic Initiative since 2014, initially known as the "Special Initiative on Community, Rights and Gender." Over the years, this initiative has grown in scope and scale[5][6][7], continuing into multiple grant cycles. It works alongside efforts to strengthen Country Coordinating Mechanisms (CCMs), helping to ensure that communities are represented, their voices heard, and their priorities reflected in funding requests, program design, and implementation.

While progress has been made in the area of CE, reviews[3] show that engagement is still inconsistent across all stages of the funding process—from requesting funds, to designing grants, to implementation. In 2017, the Global Fund introduced a performance indicator to track community engagement. Early results show a 68% satisfaction rate at the funding request stage, below the 75% target.

This evaluation looks at what combination of interventions, processes and factors makes engagement truly meaningful throughout the grant cycle. The findings will help shape future strategies, improve processes, and strengthen how the Global Fund works with communities at every stage. The evaluation approach is grounded on a clear theory of change, mapping how intended outcome can be achieved for different groups and contexts across the grant cycle.

[1] Fighting Pandemics and Building a Healthier and More Equitable World. Global Fund Strategy (2023-2028) Date published: 2023. Available: strategy_globalfund2023-2028_narrative_en.pdf
[2] The Global Fund (2024) Core Operating Manual.
[3] The Global Fund (2024) Final Evaluation of the GC6 Strategic Initiative; UNAIDS (2021) Global AIDS Strategy 2021–2026 End Inequalities. End Aids; Technical Evaluation Reference Group (2019): Position Paper - Thematic Review on Resilient and Sustainable Systems for Health (RSSH); MSMGF (2017) Independent Multi-country Review of Community Engagement in Grant Making & Implementation Processes

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Evaluation Objectives

Evaluation Purpose

To assess which combination of interventions, processes and factors have led to meaningful community engagement during the grant cycle. The findings and recommendations are expected are expected to generate organizational level learning, inform Grant Cycle 8 (GC8) preparations, enhance CE processes and interventions as well as inform deliberations that can support and strengthen meaningful community engagement.

Objectives

1. To assess the effectiveness and adequacy of community engagement processes and interventions.
2. To identify internal and external factors enabling or hindering meaningful community engagement.

A summary of the evaluation methodology is provided at the end of this brief.

Evaluation Conclusions and Key Findings

The section below provides a high-level overview of the evaluation's key conclusions and findings, with some background and context where relevant. It is followed by a summary of the evaluation recommendations, as well as the Secretariat's level of acceptance and initial response to each recommendation. For the full evaluation recommendations, please see https://www.theglobalfund.org/en/iel/evaluations/2024-07-05-evaluation-of-community-engagement-ce-in-the-global-fund-grant-cycle/.

1

Investing resources and time in targeted mechanisms that maximize opportunities to engage communities in the funding request stage can be a highly effective way of increasing meaningful community (MCE) across the disease areas and in subsequent grant cycles.

The evaluation concluded that the most meaningful CE occurred during the funding request stage. High levels of CE were characterized by active consultation and dialogue with communities.

The evaluation also found that tailored community consultations in advance of country dialogue for funding request development facilitate meaningful engagement. It noted that meaningful CE at the funding request stage depended on the CCM's leadership approach, the structure of the Country Dialogue process and available resources.

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Additionally, the evaluation concluded that technical assistance (TA) positively impacted supporting and mobilizing community and key population participation.

2 *The existence of strong engaged and proactive civil society, the presence of a balanced and deliberate CCM, and the targeted provision of TA to support front loading engagement mechanisms were the key drivers of MCE, particularly for the most marginalized populations.*

The evaluation found that meaningful community engagement (MCE) during the funding request stage depended on the CCM's leadership, the inclusiveness of country dialogue processes, resources and the strength of civil society partners. It also highlighted TA as a key factor enabling effective CE throughout all the stages of the grant lifecycle.

3 *Global Fund guidance on CE was instrumental in funding and provision of TA which facilitated MCE.*

The Global Fund supported CE through TA, capacity-building, and inclusive oversight structures that empowered communities to generate and use their own evidence. It also enabled flexible adaptation of CE activities, including in contexts with restricted civic space.

4 *There is a sense of frustration among communities created by the contrast between significant, front loaded investment in MCE at funding request stage, and limited opportunities for CE in grant making. This threatens the sustainability of CE efforts.*

CE declined after the funding request stage, reducing its continuity. Stakeholders expressed concerns that community priorities were overridden during grant-making decisions. This shift led to a disconnect between early inclusive processes and later perceived exclusion.

5 *The Global Fund's grant-making lacks transparency and space for community priorities, weakening meaningful community engagement across the grant cycle.*

Community engagement is limited during the grant-making stage, which is primarily led by the Principal Recipient, Country Team, and Local Fund Agent, with participation from the

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CCM. While government and technical partners are perceived to have greater knowledge and insight in this stage, community representatives are often less engaged. This has contributed to perceptions of limited transparency and has, at times, led to a sense of disengagement or exclusion.

6 *The level of MCE varies by disease.*

HIV-affected communities and Key Populations (KPs) are most engaged, supported by historically more established networks and organizations. TB communities are included where they have received capacity strengthening and where partnerships have helped foster their involvement. However malaria-impacted communities are least likely to be meaningfully engaged, with fewer organized, visible partners.

7 *Explicitly unpacking and assessing power dynamics among communities, KPs and in CCM representation, and identifying bespoke and targeted solutions to managing these dynamics, are closely associated with reported increases in MCE.*

CE was hindered by systemic barriers for marginalized groups and dominance by more experienced key populations. Some countries addressed internal power imbalances among key populations through decentralized dialogues that improved engagement with hard-to-reach communities.

8 *Achieving MCE through oversight and community-led monitoring (CLM) interventions builds community and KP capacity to engage in the subsequent grant cycle.*

Community engagement was most effective during oversight phases. CLM strengthened engagement and helped sustain it in future funding cycles.

9 *There are a number of innovations and good practice across the case study countries that can be used to inform future programming.*

Countries implemented flexible and context-specific strategies to sustain CE despite various challenges. For example: a) levers that have been pulled to increase MCE at all

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stages of the grant cycle. These include but are not limited to: technology, investments in capacity, flexibility in implementation, strong stakeholder networks, b) successes in increasing engagement reach of some of the most vulnerable groups who have least access to services, c) innovative ways to mitigate or navigate contextual challenges.

Evaluation Recommendations and the Secretariat Management Response

The evaluation culminated in a set of recommendations.

The evaluation recommendations are outlined below alongside the Secretariat's level of acceptance of each recommendation and initial response to each, as set out in the Secretariat Management Response[4].

Recommendation 1. Update guidelines	**Level of acceptance**
The Global Fund Secretariat, through the CE Strategic Initiative in collaboration with Technical Partners – should update existing guidelines to facilitate improved meaningful CE at the foundation stage of mid-term reviews of disease specific (HTM) national strategic plans and strengthen how the outputs can inform the development of new funding requests for HIV, TB and malaria.	Not applicable.

In response to recommendation 1, the Secretariat has identified this recommendation as not applicable. The recommendation is categorized as "For consideration". It is at the discretion of Secretariat to determine whether to respond to the recommendation.

Recommendation 2. Strengthen technical assistance	**Level of acceptance**
In collaboration with Technical Partners, the Global Fund Secretariat units, along with CCMs, should strengthen the planning, coordination, procurement, and delivery of technical assistance (TA) during both the funding request and grant-making stages of the grant cycle.	Not applicable.

[4] Evaluation of Community Engagement in the Global Fund Grant Life Cycle: Secretariat Management Response. Date published: 5 August 2025. Available: https://www.theglobalfund.org/media/aujbjwcm/iep_gf-elo-2024-06-secretariat-management_response_en.pdf.

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In response to recommendation 2, the Secretariat has identified this recommendation as not applicable. The recommendation is categorized as “For consideration”. It is at the discretion of Secretariat to determine whether to respond to the recommendation.

Recommendation 3. Include CS CCM member constituent engagement as an eligibility requirement.	**Level of acceptance**
The CCM hub and CCMs should include as a requirement the proactive engagement of CS CCM members as an eligibility requirement.	Rejected

The Secretariat agrees with the intent of the recommendation but considers comprehensive monitoring across all CCMs and constituencies impractical with current resources, noting that community engagement is already monitored through the CCM Integrated Performance Framework and reinforced by the Minimum Expectations introduced in GC7. The Secretariat believes that the focus must evolve beyond CCMs and strengthening engagement in Global Fund processes to ensure that community expertise and lived experience are embedded in country-owned mechanisms and processes where long-term investments and delivery systems are shaped.

Recommendation 4. Enhance grant-making transparency and accountability.	**Level of acceptance**
The Global Fund should demystify the grant making stage by developing clear guidance for civil society and communities on when and how to engage during grant making. Country teams (CTs) and Principal Recipients (PRs) should be required to strengthen transparency and accountability in grant-making by clearly communicating to all stakeholders - including community representatives, civil society, and CCM members - which priorities were included or excluded in the final funding request and budget, along with the rationale. The Secretariat should revise its operational guidance on community engagement during grant-making to align with the Global Fund’s founding principles.	Accepted

The Secretariat responded that there are existing mechanisms in place which can be further strengthened to ensure that there is clarity and aligned expectations around stakeholder engagement during grant-making. The Global Fund will continue enforcing Minimum Expectations for community engagement across the grant cycle, recommending timely and transparent information sharing with CCM community and civil society representatives, including automated updates and at least two formal briefings during grant making. In GC8 there will be an increased focus on expanded communication of key grant changes.

Recommendation 5. Improve guidance and practice of engagement during grant-making.	**Level of acceptance**
The Global Fund should review and improve its guidance relating to CE during grant making to clearly articulate the role of CTs in ensuring greater transparency in the process achieved. Provisions should emphasize outcomes and broaden stakeholder engagement beyond CCMs.	Rejected

The Secretariat responded this recommendation has not been accepted as there are existing processes and mechanisms in place that respond to this recommendation.

Recommendation 6. Invest in CLM and Community Systems Strengthening (CSS) to sustain community engagement.	**Level of acceptance**
Through provisions in the modular handbook and other guidance documents for GC8, the Global Fund secretariat CT, CCM Hub, CRG and Partners should mobilize countries to invest holistically in CLM and other reinforcing CSS interventions as an integrated package so that MCE is increased.	Accepted

The Secretariat responded it supports the recommendation and will be continuing to strengthen efforts to enhance CLM in GC8.

Recommendation 7. Utilize performance reviews to inform approaches to strengthen community engagement.	**Level of acceptance**
The Global Fund Secretariat should continue building on the outcomes of CCM evolution notably on oversight and engagement. Performance reviews should include relevant issues related to CCMs including those on oversight and engagement.	Accepted

Secretariat response:

- The Secretariat supports the recommendation and will continue to use the results from the CCM Integrated Performance Framework, (tool that is part of the performance review), to assess community engagement for specific CCMs.
- For CCMs with persistent challenges in community engagement, prioritize the provision of targeted TA to build capacity and ensure meaningful, inclusive engagement throughout the grant lifecycle.



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- For Focused Portfolios and portfolios expected to transition in the coming grant cycle(s), encourage CCMs to develop a roadmap for the transition of core CCM functions (such as inclusive oversight) into post-transition structures during the grant implementation period.

Recommendation 8. Improve guidance	**Level of acceptance**
The Global Fund should review and improve existing guidance to strengthen civil society and communities' engagement through CCMs in grant revisions.	Not applicable

Recommendation is categorized as "For consideration". It is at the discretion of Secretariat to determine whether to respond to recommendation.

Recommendation 9. Undertake context assessments to analyze power dynamics among communities.	**Level of acceptance**
The CCM Hub and CTs should strengthen context assessments in key Global Fund-supported countries to systematically analyze power dynamics among communities, KPs, and CCM representation.	Rejected

Secretariat response:

- Implementing this recommendation as proposed would represent a substantial expansion of scope and would require resources, technical expertise, and sustained engagement beyond the Secretariat's current mandate and capacity.
- The Secretariat will continue to navigate its way through these challenges through a number of mechanisms.

Independent Evaluation Panel (IEP) Commentary

The IEP endorsed the Evaluation of Community Engagement in the Global Fund Grant Cycle.

Evaluation Methodology

The evaluation follows an outcome-focused, as well as a theory-based and realist-inspired approach, which is explained below:

- ***Outcome-focused approach***: The evaluation focused on the achievement of meaningful CE across Global Fund lifecycle stages. To assess the achievement of outcomes the evaluation needed to compare the conditions and contextual factors

under which community engagement occurs more significantly. This helped identify what level of implementation, change and time would fall under "community engagement outcomes" in the evaluation.

- ***Theory-based and realist-inspired approach:*** The evaluation design is guided by theory about how the Global Fund achieves meaningful CE, exploring how and why selected CE interventions have or have not worked by comparing the contexts where meaningful CE has been more significant.

The evaluation's design is utilization-focused and learning-oriented. This means that the evaluation placed strong emphasis in engaging the evaluation's primary users, which include key stakeholders from the Global Fund like CSOs, technical partners, donors, and representatives of key population groups. The evaluation encouraged a responsive learning process by continuously engaging and consulting key stakeholders with emerging evidence throughout the evaluation.

The evaluation relied on the triangulation of evidence derived from the following data collection methods:

- ***A literature review.***
- ***Document review and qualitative analysis.***
- ***Theory of change iteration***.
- ***Remote data collection.***
- ***Two in-country deep dives.***

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