Evaluation of Community Responses and Systems Strengthening

Independent Evaluation Panel (IEP) Commentary

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IEP commentary on the Evaluation of Community Responses and Systems Strengthening

Executive Summary

This document reports on the Independent Evaluation Panel's (IEP) assessment of the quality and independence of the Evaluation of Community Responses and Systems Strengthening (CRSS) and summarizes key implications of its findings. Independence refers to the independence of the evaluators in the whole evaluation process. The quality considers the appropriateness of the methodology, the breadth of findings, and the rigor of analysis, as well as the alignment of data, findings, conclusions, and recommendations.

The evaluation finds that CRSS remains a promising yet under-leveraged pillar of the Global Fund model. Its potential to contribute to more resilient and sustainable health systems is constrained by inconsistent implementation and limited financing. The absence of a coherent, context-sensitive operational framework which is adapted to different maturity levels of community health systems over time, the lack of clear definitions of key concepts and useful indicators for monitoring, are some of the operational challenges, identified by the evaluation. In the face of growing global pressures—ranging from resource constraints to shrinking civic space—the findings underscore the importance of adopting a multi-cycle outlook, strengthening incentive structures and integration across the Global Fund departments, and coordinating more closely with development partners. The evaluation also highlights the need to increase the visibility of community contributions and to demonstrate their value proactively, given the vulnerability of these investments to de-prioritization.

The IEP endorses the evaluation, concluding that it meets standards of independence and quality, albeit with notable limitations in the use of its theory of change for analysis, findings and conclusions, the depth of comparative analysis, the report's accessibility, and the prioritization of findings. Greater analytical integration with related evaluations—particularly the Evaluation of Community Engagement in the Global Fund Grant Cycle (CE)—would have enhanced coherence and organizational learning. Finally, the IEP offers recommendations for future evaluations and evaluation-management processes to increase strategic value, rigor, and usability.

Conclusions

The IEP endorses the Evaluation of CRSS. The IEP, being observant of the evaluation process from supplier selection to delivery of the final deliverables, considers that the evaluation was carried out independently. The evaluation provides adequate evidence about a central pillar of the Global Fund model at a time when shifts in the global health landscape

are likely to increase demands on communities while tightening both domestic and international financing for the range of interventions assessed.

Although the conclusions and recommendations generally flow from the findings, the systematic integration of contextual and causal logic could have been more explicit to enhance credibility and strategic utility. Because community systems strengthening (CSS) interventions often encounter resistance or are deprioritized in favor of short-term service delivery targets, there is a risk that these foundational investments will be sacrificed despite their important contribution to service delivery gains and systems strengthening. The evaluation further identifies a critical barrier to sustainable investment: the value of community contributions to health outcomes is neither fully understood nor adequately recognized at global or country levels and across operating environments.

The recommendations are relevant and have been welcomed by Global Fund users, but many remain within a definitional or operational "comfort zone." For example, the evaluation team focused on feasible suggestions for strengthening monitoring to improve visibility of community interventions, without addressing more complex political economy challenges that may undermine the perceived value of these interventions and buy-in. A sharper prioritization—especially of recommendations that tackle difficult or contested issues, such as incentive structures at the Secretariat and country-team levels and their interaction with diverse local governance systems—could yield deeper insight into medium- and long-term effectiveness and sustainability.

Given the evaluation's emphasis on alignment, coherence, and integration, the IEP stresses that CRSS and CE should be treated as interdependent components of a larger ecosystem. This requires more coordinated assessment and learning across evaluations to inform both strategy and operations. Going forward, sustained focus on integration, strategic alignment, systematic reflection across evaluations, and timely course corrections will be critical to keeping community systems central—not peripheral—to the Global Fund's efforts to build more effective, resilient, and equitable health systems.

Report

Introduction

This document reports on the Independent Evaluation Panel's (IEP) assessment of the quality and independence of the Evaluation of Community Responses and Systems Strengthening and provides a brief implications analysis of the results of the evaluation.

Two members of the IEP served as Quality Assurance Focal Points. Their role was to accompany the evaluation from the supplier selection to the end and contribute both to quality improvement through the revision of the various reports and inform IEP's judgment on independence and quality through the observation of key activities.

Using a standard framework[1] for quality assessment (QA), two other members of the IEP independently assessed the final evaluation report. The assessment includes both numerical and qualitative assessment of the key elements of the evaluation - executive summary, purpose, objectives, logic model or theory of change, methodology, findings, conclusions, and recommendations. The findings presented here consider performance in these areas, comment on the recommendations, and highlight issues that could be considered to improve evaluation quality in the future.

[1] https://www.theglobalfund.org/en/iel/independent-evaluation-panel/quality-assessment-framework/

In July 2025, the IEP convened (including the four members who served as Focal Points (FP) to this evaluation) to review the final report. They reached a consensus on the evaluation's quality, independence and IEP recommendations.

Assessment of the quality and independence of the evaluation

The final evaluation report was endorsed by the Independent Evaluation Panel (IEP) and rated as 'good.'[2] Despite this, the IEP noted that the application of certain methods showed weaknesses, which limited the report's analytical depth, strategic prioritization, and utility for decision-making. The report's accessibility is less than acceptable. The IEP noted that these issues might have been mitigated at earlier stages—such as during procurement, inception, or draft reviews—and therefore recommended that the C/ELO explore additional measures to address quality bottlenecks throughout the entire evaluation lifecycle.

While the IEP concluded that the evaluation was conducted independently, it recommended additional steps to improve transparency. Specifically, the panel called for better documentation, justification and transparency for the sampling of countries, individuals, and methods to mitigate perceived bias. The IEP also advised the Global Fund to continue working to diversify its pool of evaluators.

IEP Assessment of the Evaluation Report

Background

Objectives and Scope of the Evaluation:

The Evaluation of Community Responses and Systems Strengthening (CRSS) was commissioned by the Evaluation and Learning Office (ELO). Its purpose was to assess how CRSS is conceptualized, operationalized, and contributes to improved access to HIV, TB, and malaria (HTM) services, as well as to broader health system strengthening. It was expected to inform actionable recommendations to enhance Global Fund support for community-led responses (CLR) and broader community systems strengthening (CSS).

The evaluation's intent, timing, and primary audiences are clearly defined. The IEP (from the time of ToR development) noted a partial thematic overlap with the CE Evaluation. The evaluation team's ex-post comparison of findings with the latter is welcome, but the lack of early analytical coordination across two evaluations and access to relevant materials limited the potential for coherent analysis. This missed opportunity constrained the evaluation's ability to make greater contribution to organizational coherence, efficiency and learning.

Methodology

The evaluation employed a mixed-methods, theory-based design, combining process evaluation with outcome harvesting and contribution analysis. A theory of change (ToC) was developed collaboratively with Global Fund stakeholders, supporting internal clarity and reflection. However, the ToC lacked grounding in existing literature and was not systematically applied to examine assumptions or to analyze the interaction of context, mechanism, and outcomes. The absence of structured, theory-based analysis limited the explanatory power and, to a degree, negatively affected the robustness of the findings. Comparative analysis remained largely descriptive, offering limited analytic and strategic insights. The participatory and learning-oriented approach, anchored in a learning partnership, is a strength of the evaluation. The addition of a "Learning" section is particularly welcome and should be institutionalized across future evaluations, unless deemed inappropriate.

[2] Evaluation quality is assessed on a four-point scale: Unacceptable, Less Than Acceptable, Good, or Very Good.

Data Collection: The evaluation uses quantitative and qualitative sources for data collection. The rationale for data collection and analysis was generally sound. The evaluation team demonstrated adaptability to contextual challenges by adjusting data collection methods appropriately and responsibly.

Country Sampling Strategy: The sampling of countries was determined by the Secretariat using criteria that were not transparently described in the report, weakening perceptions of independence and robustness.

Triangulation and Strength of Evidence: The report applies clear criteria to assess evidence strength, however, available documentation of how data quality assurance was measured is limited. Multiple data sources are triangulated throughout, bolstering confidence in the findings. However, the prioritization of voices—particularly of community actors—could be further strengthened, especially given the centrality of CRSS to the Global Fund's model.

Findings

The report's findings appear to be evidence-based and highlight the strategic importance—and vulnerability—of CRSS within the Global Fund's model. In particular, the evaluation highlights the catalytic value of sustained, multi-cycle investments in CRSS—especially when Community Led Monitoring (CLM) is adequately supported, integrated and adapted to context. There have been more limited investments in other types of Community Systems Strengthening (CSS) interventions.

While contributions to the access, quality, and accountability of HIV, TB, and malaria services—particularly for underserved and stigmatized populations—are evidenced, concerns about long-term sustainability remain. Declining, insufficient, and unpredictable funding poses a major constraint. Because CSS interventions often encounter resistance or are deprioritized in favor of short-term service delivery targets, there is a risk that these foundational investments will be sacrificed despite their important contribution to service delivery gains and systems strengthening. The evaluation further identifies a critical barrier to sustainable investment: the value of community contributions to health outcomes is neither fully understood nor adequately recognized at global or country levels and across operating environments.

At the operational level, the report emphasizes the need to tailor investments and approaches to each country's progression in community systems strengthening. Yet, momentum is often halted by weak incentives to sustain rollout or by overreliance on the informal initiative of country teams. Fragmentation in internal definitions and approaches to CRSS and lack of adequate incentives —mirrored by siloed operations among development partners and limited government buy-in—also undermines coherence across funding requests, national plans, budgets, integrated implementation, and sustainability planning.

Key conclusions and recommendations

This evaluation is highly pertinent given the centrality of CRSS to the Global Fund model and the evolving global health landscape, which will both increase demands on communities and intensify financing gaps for multi-cycle investments to support them.

Although key conclusions and recommendations flow from the findings, gaps between critical insights and proposed actions risk limiting the evaluation's strategic utility. For instance, while the report notes that support approaches vary by context, it stops short of clearly illustrating how different combinations of contextual factors and mechanisms contribute to outcomes. Such a synthesis would help the Secretariat weigh trade-offs and implement the recommended changes more confidently.

The recommendations are relevant and feasible, yet some remain within a definitional or operational "comfort zone." For example, the evaluation advises improving performance indicators and drawing on successful country models to increase visibility of community contributions, demonstrate return on investment, facilitate cross-context learning, and create stronger incentives for CRSS and integration. However, developing robust and useful measures will require grappling with the complex nature of CRSS outcomes and associated political-economy dynamics—both at country level and within the Global Fund—that influence data production and use. Some of these dynamics are referred to in the report and noted in user-group discussions but not underscored in the conclusions and recommendations. A sharper prioritization of recommendations—including those that address more challenging issues such as governance or critical trade-offs—could strengthen the strategic relevance of the recommendation.

Given the evaluation's emphasis on alignment, sustainability, and integration, the IEP underscores the importance of treating CRSS and CE as interdependent components of a broader ecosystem. The latter evaluation identified effects of CLM on CE. Going forward, sustained focus on integration, strategic alignment, and cross-evaluation learning will be critical to keeping community systems central—not peripheral—to the Global Fund's efforts to make more effective and sustainable investments in pursuit of its objectives.

Strengthening future evaluation processes

The IEP offers the following reflections to improve future evaluations:

Theory of Change: The inclusion of a ToC is commendable, increasingly standard and valued by stakeholders who develop as part of an evaluation process. However, it must be theoretically grounded and used rigorously as an analytical tool to strengthen causal explanations and transferability of findings.

Integration Across Evaluations: Early and formal coordination among evaluations with overlapping themes should be institutionalized to avoid fragmentation and duplication. Access to evaluation materials and cross-citation should be standard practice. Planning should consider joined-up evaluations with adjusted budgets to increase efficiencies and synergies.

Evaluation Management: Stronger quality requirements in the end-to-end management of evaluations and internal accountability mechanisms are needed from procurement to dissemination. Continue efforts to improve transparency and reflexivity in sampling and methodological choices. Document any methodological adaptations clearly, including changes made during implementation. Consider setting page limits that promote both analytical clarity and accessibility. Avoid overreliance on operational or definitional recommendations at the expense of systemic and strategic issues.

Learning and Follow-Up: Institutionalize a "Learning" section in all evaluations. The ELO should strengthen follow-up systems to ensure implementation of recommendations.