Evaluation Brief

Evaluation of the Global Fund Funding Request and Grant-making Stages of the Funding Cycle

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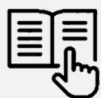## Evaluation Recommendations and the Secretariat Management Response

Independent Evaluation Panel (IEP) Commentary

Evaluation Methodology

This evaluation brief is a high-level summary of the documents developed for the Evaluation of the Global Fund Funding Request and Grant-Making Stages of the 2023-2025 Funding 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 Euro Health Group. The evaluation was conducted under the oversight of the Global Fund Independent Evaluation Panel (IEP).

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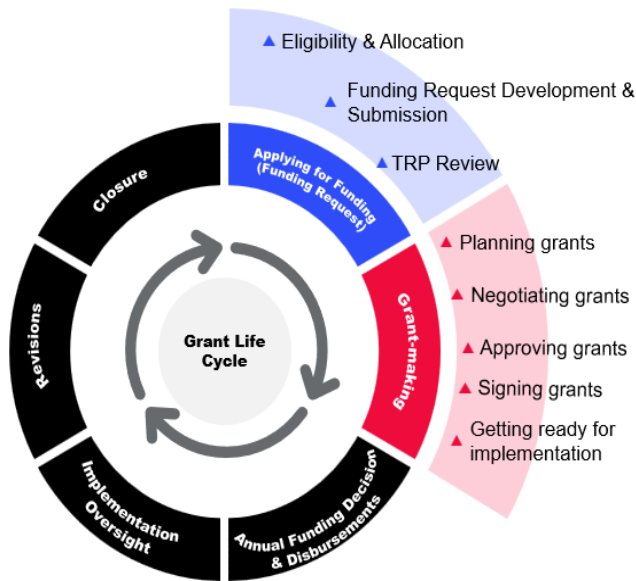https://www.theglobalfund.org/en/iel/

Introduction

Figure 1: Overview of the Funding Request and Grant-making Stages of the Global Fund Grant Life Cycle is adapted from the internal presentation GMD Orientation Program for New Staff to the Grant Management Division, November 2024.

The Global Fund is currently in its 2023-2025 allocation period, also referred to as Grant Cycle 7 (GC7). In 2024, as requested by the Board, the Global Fund commissioned an independent evaluation of the GC7 funding request and grant-making stages of the funding cycle.

The Global Fund raises and invests money in three-year cycles known as Replenishments. Following the Replenishment period, funds are allocated to countries eligible to receive an allocation from the Global Fund. To access these funds, countries are required to submit a funding request. If the funding request is approved, corresponding grants are created. These stages are respectively referred to as the funding request and the grant-making stages of the Global Fund Grant Life Cycle shown in Figure 1 and further described below:

1. *Funding request stage*: Applicants develop funding requests that describe how allocated funds will be spent in alignment with national strategic plans, how performance will be managed and who will be responsible for implementation. The independent Technical Review Panel (TRP) reviews the requests and recommends whether they can proceed to grant-making. Each complete funding request includes an application form, key annexes, and supporting documents.

2. *Grant-making stage*: Funding requests are translated into quality grants that are disbursement- and implementation-ready. Grant negotiations take place between the Global Fund and the selected Principal Recipient in consultation with in-country stakeholders and communities. Following review and recommendations from the Grant Approvals Committee, the grant is signed by the Principal Recipient and Country Coordinating Mechanism and, upon Board approval, signed by the Global Fund.

While the Global Fund allocation-based funding model remains largely unchanged for GC7, some adaptations and changes were introduced during the funding request and grant-making stages. These changes are based on learning from previous cycles and to drive the delivery of the Global Fund's 2023-2028 Strategy.

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Evaluation Objectives

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🖋 Evaluation Purpose

To assess the design, operationalization and implementation of the GC7 funding request and grant-making stages and capture real-time learning to provide recommendations for GC8.

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Objectives

1. *Effectiveness*: To examine if the funding request and grant-making stages and inherent processes lead to grants that are:

   - Aligned with national priorities; and
   - Support to the delivery of the Global Fund's 2023-2028 Strategy

2. *Efficiency*:

   - To evaluate if the related procedures and processes are fit for purpose; and
   - To identify opportunities for improvement, rationalization and simplification.

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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 Evaluation Recommendations and the Secretariat Management Response.

1 **GC7 funding request and grant-making stages have been effective in generating high-quality, implementation-ready grants that support the implementation of the Global Fund's 2023-2028 Strategy.**

The following findings support this conclusion:

- The maturity and established practices of the Global Fund funding model have enabled efficiencies.
- Tailored analyses of epidemiological and programmatic gaps help steer countries' funding requests and help the prioritization of Focused Portfolios, one of the three Global Fund portfolio categories based on country allocation and disease burden (High Impact, Core and Focused).
- Country Dialogue is effective in ensuring broad-based stakeholder engagement and contributes to strengthening the quality, alignment, and relevance of grant design, at the same time being less effective in prioritization processes.

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- Global Fund Secretariat advisory and country team inputs support grant preparedness, planning, and key funding request and grant-making stages.
- TRP reviews enhance the strategic focus, quality, and technical soundness of funding requests and contribute to the potential impact of grants. Differentiated TRP reviews based on funding request approach and portfolio have enabled more efficiency in GC7, though there is scope to improve these efficiencies further.

While the Global Fund's funding request processes are effective in ensuring that grants support the Global Fund's strategic priorities, the evaluation notes that they are weaker in ensuring national and local stakeholder priorities.

2   *The "start from scratch" nature of the funding request and grant-making process every three years has implications for the efficiency and effectiveness of the grant.*

The evaluation observed that the three-year cycle introduces inefficiencies resulting from increased workload for implementers in the current grant period and slower startup of new grants, potentially affecting progress towards targets.

The three-year life cycle requires implementers to start planning for new grants midway through an active grant period. Efforts toward the next grant cycle intensify during an active grant's final year resulting in a higher level of effort for implementers during a relatively short grant cycle.

Based on these findings, the evaluation opined that longer grant cycles could provide stability and continuity, reduce the administrative burden and allow consistent focus on programmatic goals. An extended funding cycle would also benefit longer-term investments in resilient and sustainable systems for health (RSSH).

3   *Differentiation into five funding request application approaches has not simplified funding request and grant-making processes for either the Secretariat or country stakeholders.*

In order to improve efficiency, reduce disruption to country programs and enable more time for ongoing grant implementation, the Global Fund developed five different funding request approaches to be adopted in GC7:

- Program Continuation,
- Full Review,
- Tailored for National Strategic Plans (NSPs),
- Tailored for Focused Portfolios, and
- Tailored for Countries in Transition.

Differentiated grant-making processes for focused portfolios were also introduced.

The evaluation found that differentiated efforts have not significantly reduced administrative loads, nor have they resulted in faster access to funds or more time available for grant implementation. Complex internal reviews and grant-making

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processes negate benefits from lighter funding request approaches. The high volume of information required across all GC7 funding request approaches demands a similar level of effort for all application approaches, diminishing the intended effects of differentiation. Nevertheless, the evaluation noted that a more systematic application of particular funding request approaches would have the potential to simplify the application process.

4   *The multiple – and often unclear – technical support and compliance roles of Secretariat teams hinder efficiency of the funding request and grant-making continuum.*

Different Secretariat teams are required to provide input, review and sign-off documents at different stages during funding request and grant-making processes. While such inputs aim to enhance the quality and compliance in funding request and grant-making stages, the evaluation observed that the number of different teams involved in the review process and the corresponding volume of input (from technical and functional teams endorsing or signing off documents), particularly during grant-making, has inadvertently led to complexity and inefficiency.

The evaluation found that this complexity and inefficiency is exacerbated by unclear technical support and compliance roles and responsibilities at different steps, resulting in excessive and sometimes duplicative inputs.

5   *The proliferation of Secretariat-based information needs drives complexity and workload in funding request and grant-making stages.*

The evaluation found that the broad scope of the 2023-2028 Strategy, multiple Board and donor interests, and the pressure to demonstrate value-for-money results have led to a growth of Secretariat-driven data requirements, especially in GC7. These requirements create operational demands on the Secretariat and country programs with questionable added value in relation to country needs or grant quality.

There are some examples of new levers and annexes introduced in GC7 having been useful in helping applicants capture and prioritize gaps related to RSSH, civil society and community priorities, program essentials, gender equality and implementation readiness, among other important areas. However, they were found to increase complexity – requiring further inputs for monitoring, analysis, compliance, and reporting. The evaluation observed that there was no effective mechanism in place within the Secretariat for GC7 with gatekeeping power and authority to make decisions on the feasibility and utility of additional requirements.

6

The significant investment of Secretariat time and effort on the funding request and grant-making stages of the grant cycle limits the streamlining of grant processes at the country level.

The current emphasis on the funding request and grant-making stages of the grant life cycle overshadows the need for investment in grant implementation, which would allow more streamlined and continuous grant monitoring and review processes. The evaluation found that this leads to unnecessary pressure on countries and hinders a smooth transition between grants.

7

Technical assistance (TA) continues to be a vital component in establishing high-quality funding requests due to the complexity of Global Fund guidance and requirements.

The evaluation found that TA remains critical in establishing high-quality funding requests and in strengthening national strategic plans as foundational documents for funding requests.

Increased engagement by TA providers in GC7 highlights the importance of TA in navigating the complex requirements and will likely continue to be essential in supporting simplified funding request implementation and focusing on national health or disease strategic plans.

8

The guidance and assessment on RSSH funding have shown weaknesses that impact the efficiency and effectiveness of RSSH investments.

Through an allocation letter, the Global Fund notifies eligible countries of the allocated funding for the three disease components; it proposes an indicative split of funds across disease components, and applicants are required to indicate the intended investment amount for RSSH from within the allocation for each disease component.

The evaluation found that the lack of timely RSSH assessments and specificity in allocation letters regarding RSSH funding amounts complicates program split decisions and affects funding request approaches. These challenges highlighted the need for clearer guidance on RSSH funding through country allocations and more timely assessments; these could enhance the efficiency of decision-making processes and support countries in making informed, strategic decisions that align with their broader health priorities and universal health coverage ambitions.

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Evaluation Recommendations and the Secretariat Management Response

To achieve greater efficiency and effectiveness in the funding request and grant-making stages of the grant life cycle, 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](#).

Overall the Secretariat is committed to simplifying processes under the steer and guidance of an internal Grant Life Cycle (GLC) Governance Mechanism[1]. Final decisions on changes and simplification will only take place later in 2025. The Secretariat will be using the recommendations of the evaluation to inform potential changes.

Recommendation 1	Level of acceptance
Introduce an extended (six-year) planning cycle increasingly aligned to national strategic plans (NSP)/ national health (NHP) plans and support light-touch review to extension.	Partially accepted

In response to Recommendation 1, the Secretariat:

- Commits to simplifying the funding request and grant-making stages to address many of the "pressure points" raised by the evaluation. Once implemented, these measures should limit the need to transition from a three-year allocation to a six-year allocation.
- Recognizes that in limited contexts, for example, for designated Transition Portfolios, a six-year funding request can shift the investment of time and effort toward implementation. However, the Secretariat underlined that the additional upfront requirements and level of effort needed to produce the six-year funding request need to be justified by a reduced workload later on and an efficient process for a mid-point update.
- Agrees that NSPs/NHPs should increasingly align with funding requests for High-Impact and Core Portfolios.

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[1] The Secretariat has consolidated and formalized the Grant Life Cycle (GLC) governance structure, including the GLC Steering Committee. This governance mechanism is responsible for overseeing the end-to-end grant life cycle, including processes, systems and additional information requirements.

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Recommendation 2

Streamline funding request stage through one simplified funding request approach "Funding Application".

Level of acceptance

Partially accepted

In response to Recommendation 2, the Secretariat:

- Agrees that the funding request stage must be streamlined and simplified for all applicants in order to increase the time and focus available for implementation but does not support returning to an "one-size-fits-all" approach.
- Plans to explore a differentiated role of the TRP in relation to Focused, or small middle-income countries.

Recommendation 3

Streamline grant-making stage processes by ensuring the right people provide inputs at the right moments.

Level of acceptance

Partially accepted

In response to Recommendation 3, the Secretariat:

- Supports the need to improve clarity and efficiency regarding roles and responsibilities within the Secretariat and among technical partners prior to GC8.
- Agrees to revisit the Grant Approval Committee timelines and terms of reference to streamline and optimize the grant review process.

Recommendation 4

Provide targeted support to country NSPs/NHPs during the grant cycle using external TA and technical partners.

Level of acceptance

Partially accepted

In response to Recommendation 4, the Secretariat:

- Agrees that it is more valuable for TA to focus on improving the prioritization of evidence-based interventions in NSPs or NHPs, rather than limiting its focus to developing a Global Fund application.
- Emphasizes the need for collective action by the Global Fund Partnership to provide support to countries with the development of NSPs and NHPs.
- Both internal and external expertise should be used as a source of TA in line with the in-country needs and capacities.

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| Recommendation 5

Develop a "gatekeeper" role with the authority to uphold the internal goal to achieve simplification in GC8. | **Level of acceptance**

Accepted |

In response to Recommendation 5, the Secretariat will:

- Leverage the Grant Life Cycle Governance Mechanism to simplify funding request and grant-making processes and requirements by 30%.
- Ensure a reduction in Global Fund funding request and grant-making guidance for GC8 with an internal target of 30% reduction.
- The Grant Life Cycle Governance structure will oversee the overall simplification process and ensure the internal target is upheld.

| Recommendation 6

Ensure grant priorities, including for RSSH, are identified prior to the start of funding applications. | **Level of acceptance**

Partially accepted |

In response to Recommendation 6, the Secretariat:

- Agrees there is value in the Global Fund providing a prioritization steer to countries earlier in the funding cycle, where relevant, based on a country's NSP/NHP and shares the view that RSSH guidance should be simplified and strengthened.
- Refers to the 2024 Independent Evaluation of the Global Fund Resource Allocation Methodology, which reviewed the issue of RSSH investment communication and concluded that a fourth share for RSSH in the upfront disease split is not recommended.
- However, will further explore the process, benefits, and limitations of communicating a percentage (or percentage range) of country allocations for RSSH tailored to the country context and propose options for discussion at the Strategy Committee in 2025. More on this can be found in the Secretariat Management Response to the Independent Evaluation of the Global Fund Resource Allocation Methodology.

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Independent Evaluation Panel (IEP) Commentary

The IEP endorsed the [Evaluation of the Global Fund Funding Request and Grant-Making Stages of the 2023-2025 Funding Cycle](#).

The [IEP Commentary](#) concluded:

> "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 [IEP Quality Assessment] review has demonstrated a satisfactory quality of the methodology and rigor of its use that is of acceptable quality to conclude on the effectiveness and efficiency of funding request and grant-making processes reflected in the evaluation report."

Evaluation Methodology

Process tracing was the core methodological approach used in the evaluation's design, methods, data collection strategy and analysis. This involved establishing a hypothesis and tracing causal mechanisms between the sequence of steps across the reviewed funding request and grant-making processes. The evaluation relied on the triangulation of evidence that came from the following data collection tools:

- **Global-level key informant interviews** and **focus group discussions** with Secretariat process owners/stewards, review panels and committees including the TRP, Grant Approvals Committee, and Strategy Committee members, and TA providers including the UNAIDS Technical Support Mechanism and Expertise France.
- **Global-level document review**, including application forms and annexes, guidance material, evaluation reports from major TA providers, and prior evaluations and reviews of funding request and grant-making processes.
- **Country grant analysis** focused on 13 funding requests and final approved grants across nine sampled countries and interviews with country stakeholders including country teams, Country Coordinating Mechanisms, Principal Recipients, technical working groups and writing teams.
- **Secondary analysis** of Global Fund data on funding request and grant-making processes, such as aggregated budgets, internal trackers, and survey data across the portfolio
- An **online survey** to assess the Secretariat's and country stakeholders' level of effort required to complete the steps along the funding request and grant-making continuum and their perceived added value to the production of high-quality, implementation-ready grants.

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