



Evaluation of Capacity, Quality and Decision-making in Sub-national Tailoring of Malaria Interventions

Independent Evaluation Panel (IEP)
Commentary

GF/ ELO/2024/05/03

30 July 2025

Geneva, Switzerland

IEP Commentary on the Evaluation of Capacity, Quality, and Decision-making in Sub-national Tailoring of Malaria Interventions

30 May 2025

Executive Summary

This document provides a Commentary on the **Independent Evaluation Panel's assessment** of the quality and independence of an **Evaluation of the Capacity, Quality and Decision-making in Sub-national Tailoring of Malaria Interventions**. This evaluation was in response to a need identified by constituencies during the 20th Strategy Committee Meeting and reaffirmed by the Global Fund Board at a subsequent meeting. The Commentary provides an analysis of implications of the evaluation results. 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 overall purpose of the evaluation was to a) provide the Global Fund Secretariat, Strategy Committee, Board, and global health community with an independent evaluation of data use and decision-making in Sub-national Tailoring (SNT) for optimal malaria programming b) use learnings and recommendations to inform decisions on improving tailored, locally appropriate approaches to facilitate malaria control and elimination, and related investment and grant design and c) provide a baseline for future evaluations.

The evaluation had 3 objectives:

1. Assess the capacity, quality of data and decision-making in SNT of malaria interventions.
2. Assess how the Global Fund and other stakeholders have and can incentivize the use of sub-national data and financial optimization to maximize impact.
3. Examine the role of national and sub-national leadership, agency and capacity in implementing effective SNT, including the development of optimized NMSPs and funding applications to the Global Fund.

Conclusions

The IEP endorses the SNT evaluation.

Having observed the evaluation process from supplier selection to submission of the final deliverables, the IEP is of the view that the evaluation was carried out independently and is satisfactory in terms of quality. The methods employed demonstrate adequate scientific rigor leading to credible results and conclusions that have been categorized by a rating of the supporting strength of evidence. The evaluation has offered bold recommendations that propose changes to the current Global Fund support for and incentivization of sub-national programme leadership, ownership and implementation of tailored strategic plans for the consideration of the Board. However, the current funding environment may require making choices on the deployment of TGF resources to address the recommendations of the evaluation, if and where relevant.

The IEP provides specific comments on the SNT evaluation report as well as recommendations to the Secretariat for improving the quality of evaluations in the future.

Introduction

This document reports on the Independent Evaluation Panel's assessment of the quality and independence of an Evaluation of the Capacity, Quality and Decision-making in Sub-national Tailoring of Malaria Interventions (SNT) 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 review of the final draft report and contribute to quality improvement through the revision of the various reports and inform IEP's judgment on independence through the observation of key activities. One of the Quality Assurance focal points participated in the entire process of supplier selection as an observer.

Using a standard template 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 assessment presented here considers performance in these areas, comments on the recommendations, and highlights issues that could be considered to improve evaluation quality in the future.

The IEP discussed the assessment at its meeting on March 20th, 2025, led by its four members involved in the evaluation, to reach a consensus on the quality and independence of the evaluation.

Assessment of the quality and independence of the evaluation

Quality of the report

1. The quality of the report is rated as 'good' with minor weaknesses, noted in comments, but not materially affecting the quality, findings, conclusions and recommendations of the report and IEP opinion.

Independence of the evaluation

2. The IEP, having observed the evaluation process from supplier selection to submission of the final deliverables, considers that the evaluation was carried out independently and has led to some rather bold recommendations for the Board to consider.

IEP Assessment of the Evaluation Report

3. The report is well structured and of appropriate length. The executive summary is representative of the main report and could largely provide adequate information as a standalone document, including all the necessary elements.
4. **The purpose of the evaluation** is clearly defined with the scope and objectives clearly stated.
5. The evaluation outlines **the intended uses and users of the evaluation**. The primary audience for the evaluation being the Global Fund Secretariat teams, the Strategy Committee, Board, and the Global Malaria community.
6. **The evaluation questions** have been mapped out and aligned to the evaluation domains so that no evaluation question or sub-question is left out.
7. **Methodology** The evaluation employed a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods which have been clearly described. The data collection methods have been clearly outlined. The analysis carried out was clearly outlined. Limitations of the study and relevant mitigation strategies are also clearly presented. Ethical considerations and safeguards for participants have been clearly described, and measures were implemented to ensure anonymity and confidentiality.
8. **Triangulation and strength of evidence:** the data from the different sources are triangulated to ensure the strength of the evidence. The conclusions emanate from the finding and are rated in terms of the strength of evidence supporting the conclusions. Most are rated as strong which ensures confidence. The recommendations, which are well aligned with the findings and conclusions, are categorized into critical and important.
9. The evaluation provided rich findings and information – graphics were used where possible to make the report accessible. Findings were clearly linked to conclusions, on which recommendations were explicitly based.
10. The evaluators indicate adherence to the United Nations Evaluation Group norms and standards¹ as well as other key ethical principles.

¹ https://www.unevaluation.org/uneg_publications/uneg-norms-and-standards-evaluation-un-system

IEP Comments on the evaluation report

Executive Summary

11. **Comment 1:** Findings could have been more distilled in the executive summary.

Section 1. Background and Context

12. **Comment 2:** The background to the evaluation could have been enhanced by providing information that is more specific to sub-national tailoring of interventions for malaria.

Section 2. Purpose, Objectives, Theory of Change and Evaluation Questions

13. **Comment 3:** While the objectives of the evaluation are clearly stated, the document does not clearly state the evaluation questions. A considerable portion of this section is focused on a revised conceptual model, referred to as the **Extended SNT Process** and evaluator-developed domains to guide the evaluation. The evaluation questions themselves were placed in a table in the annex. The main evaluation questions could usefully have been listed in a section on Evaluation Questions so that the reader does not have to go to the annex before he/she can tell what they are.
14. **Comment 4:** The SNT Maturity Assessment tool v1 was said to have been used for 3 countries while the v2 was used for other countries. It is challenging for the reader to assess which of these two versions reflects best the true state of SNT maturity.

Section 4. Findings and Conclusions

15. **Comment 5:** It is important in this section to bring out some delineation between political decentralization and program decentralization to bring out clearly the relative influence of these on sub-national autonomy and decision-making with regards to SNT. This would also highlight to the Global Fund, what is within the control of the NMP vs what is a more complex, health system reform issue.

Section 6. Conclusions and strength of evidence

16. **Comment 6:** Findings could have been more distilled. For example, one key evaluation question was 'How much have the key concepts of SNT been reflected in the malaria FRs?' In the annex of the report a clear answer is given ('D5: FRs do not reflect SNT thinking of countries as well as NSPs'), but that is reflected in a more nuanced way in the final recommendations. More direct language is useful. Other examples are a statement in the body of the report that "there were no implementation guidelines on SNT in any of the countries visited" and this important statement did not make it to the executive summary.

Section 3. Evaluation Design

17. **Comment 7:** It is unclear how countries were selected relative to the underlying assumption of the evaluation team. Countries were selected in terms of representativeness of, for example, burden, elimination status etc. How those criteria related to key underlying assumptions is not made explicit.
18. **Comment 8:** Methods do not elucidate how country case studies were analysed in terms of cross-comparisons. There are methodological frameworks for case study analyses, but those were not used.

Implications of analysis on the findings, conclusions, and recommendations of the evaluation

The IEP broadly agrees with the prioritization of recommendations by the evaluation team.

However, given the findings and conclusions, **the IEP would elevate the recommendation to ‘apply core principles of the Lusaka Agenda to the core malaria SNT partnership’ from ‘important’ to ‘critical’ given the level of influence external partners have on malaria programs.** Additionally, we would interpret the recommendation more directly as ‘Increase coordination among global and national stakeholders – misalignment among global partners remains a significant barrier to effective national program execution. Greater efforts are needed to harmonize technical guidance, support country-led strategies, and ensure national expertise is valued in decision-making’

More broadly, **the recommendations align with the Global Fund’s principle of country ownership and focus on country-driven priorities.** The finding that sub-national governance improves program outcomes suggests that the Global Fund may need to provide more direct financial and technical support to decentralized malaria programs – if systems and processes of the Global Fund and countries allow it to do ²so. Stronger local leadership should impact HIV and TB programming at that level too.

However, **for countries with centralized systems, or in challenging operating environments, there is perhaps more of an impetus to strengthen community systems** to build resilience and decision making at those levels.

The conclusion that **there is limited evidence on cost-effectiveness of layered interventions poses a challenge for program optimization.** Thus, the recommendation that more is invested in research in this area is warranted to better optimize Global Fund investments for maximum impact. This challenge is also seen in HIV prevention (e.g., PrEP

² <https://news.un.org/en/story/2012/09/420722>

scale-up vs. treatment as prevention), and TB screening/treatment strategies. Better cost-effectiveness data applies across all three disease programs.

The **Global Funds market-shaping role in commodity procurement remains critical**, and if this is not aligned with country needs, or supporting flexible sub-national tailoring, countries may struggle to deploy newer tools as part of the 'Big Push' initiative launched by the Global Fund (See News Release 25 September 2012).

Strengthening future evaluation processes

IEP would like to note continued synergy between ELO and IEP as part of the evaluation processes which are managed by ELO. As for other recent evaluations, IEP observed the end-to-end process from evaluator selection to delivery of final deliverables.

While the ELO created an inclusive and transparent process for IEP quality assurance focal point engagement, there were discrepancies between procedures compared to other evaluations which could be better standardized, for example, providing the TORs and Inception Report as specified in the QAF as well as providing user-group comments on inception and draft reports to IEP focal points as standard set of documents that should be made available to FPs for every evaluation, and not on request. Additionally, more direct communication between the IEP and evaluators to clarify some initial issues highlighted for the inception may have been more efficient for the ELO team instead of a three-way communication between the IEP, the ELO and the Evaluators.

The use of Natural Language Processing for this evaluation was perhaps early given the issues described by the evaluation team, and their subsequent steep learning curve and reversion to manual review of documents. It would be better to fully test the NLP, ensure it is fit for purpose and consider that i) NLP adheres to the principle of confidentiality, ii) more clearly identify what NLP is being used for within the ELO, and for any evaluation report audiences, iii) assess the capacity of evaluators to use NLP as appropriate during evaluations.

The complexity of the evaluation was increased by the addition of countries to an already large sample size, and a relatively large sample of case study countries. It would be good for the ELO to consider enabling evaluators to select countries based on evaluation assumptions and hypotheses rather than on potential representativeness, which may not relate to the underlying evaluation question. Smaller samples, with more time for, for example, sub-national level interviews, could provide richer sources of information for evaluations that are based largely on qualitative findings.