



Evaluation of Community Engagement in the Global Fund Grant Life Cycle

Independent Evaluation Panel (IEP)
Commentary

GF/ELO/2024/06/03

05 August 2025

Geneva, Switzerland

IEP commentary on the Evaluation of Community Engagement in the Global Fund Grant Cycle

Executive Summary

This document reports on the Independent Evaluation Panel's (IEP) assessment of the quality and independence of the Evaluation of Community Engagement in the Global Fund Grant Cycle and 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 assess which combination of interventions, processes and factors have led to meaningful community engagement during the grant cycle. The findings and recommendations 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. There are two main objectives for this evaluation a/to assess the effectiveness and adequacy of community engagement processes and interventions b/ to identify internal and external factors enabling or hindering meaningful community engagement.

Conclusions

The IEP endorses the Evaluation of Community Engagement in the Global Fund Cycle. 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 review provides sufficient evidence to draw conclusions about the effectiveness and adequacy of the community engagement processes described in the report. However, the IEP noted areas for improvement, particularly regarding the recommendations section, where additional enhancements could increase the report's utility. Recommendations for strengthening community engagement processes were discussed with stakeholders to ensure their relevance, actionability, and alignment with the needs of process owners and evaluation users. The Panel believes that further development of the recommendations—potentially including more challenging or debated points—could improve the effectiveness and sustainability of the overall CE approach.

The Panel provides specific comments on the evaluation report, as well as recommendations for improving the quality of evaluations in the future.

Report

Introduction

This document reports on the Independent Evaluation Panel's (IEP) assessment of the quality and independence of the Evaluation of Community Engagement in the Global Fund grant Cycle and provides a brief implications analysis of the results of the evaluation.

One member of the IEP served as a Quality Assurance Focal Point. His 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 framework¹ for quality assessment (QA), two other members of the IEP independently assessed the evaluation final 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.

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

Assessment of the quality and independence of the evaluation

The IEP endorsed the final evaluation report. The quality of the report is rated as 'good'² with minor weaknesses, noted in comments, but not materially affecting the findings, conclusions and recommendations of the evaluation report, although limiting the scope of the recommendations.³

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.

IEP Assessment of the Evaluation Report

Background

Objectives and Scope of the Evaluation:

The Evaluation of Community Engagement in the Global Fund Grant Cycle was commissioned by the Evaluation Learning Office (ELO) under Terms of Reference (ToR) dated September 2024⁴. Its purpose was to determine which interventions, processes, and factors led to meaningful CE

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

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

³ With the support and input of the Evaluation and Learning Office, the Independent Evaluation Panel has developed a Quality Assessment Framework to evaluate the final reports of evaluations. Evaluation reports are assessed on a four-point scale on quality: Unacceptable, Less Than Acceptable, Good, or Very Good.

⁴ <https://www.theglobalfund.org/en/iel/evaluations/2024-07-05-evaluation-of-community-engagement-ce-in-the-global-fund-grant-cycle/>

during the grant cycle. The evaluation's intent, timing, and intended users are outlined. However, it would have been helpful if the report had provided additional context on how this evaluation relates to broader global development efforts and parallel initiatives by TGF and other donors.

During the IEP's endorsement processes, the Panel noted partial thematic overlap with concurrent exercises (e.g., Community Responses and Systems Strengthening [CRSS]; Imbizo) and recommended cross-fertilization to enhance strategic learning. Despite overlapping themes—such as community-led monitoring and power dynamics—the final report does not reflect explicit synergies with these related evaluations.

Utilization-Focused Approach:

The evaluation indicates a utilization-focused methodology, designed to deliver responsive outputs tailored to multiple user groups—Global Fund Secretariat divisions, community-led organizations, technical partners, and external stakeholders (e.g., donors, implementers). Although the ToR and inception report articulated these diverse audiences, the final report's conclusions and recommendations are largely Secretariat-oriented. The report does not clearly explain any departures from the ToR or inception design, nor justify those changes. As a result, non-Secretariat users may lack a clear roadmap to apply the findings, potentially limiting strategic impact beyond internal policy adjustments.

Methodology

The evaluation employs a Theory of Change (ToC) that articulates hypothesized causal pathways linking TGF's inputs to outcomes. This ToC was substantiated and refined during the evaluation, and mixed-methods data collection (triangulating qualitative and quantitative sources) aligns with the Global Fund QA Template. However, key QA deliverables—such as the published ToR, data collection instruments, and a log of methodological changes—are missing from the annexes. Their absence reduces transparency and makes it challenging for external stakeholders to verify how methodological decisions evolved.

Data Collection

The evaluation provides justification for its choice of methods and outlines the analysis approach for each data type. Reasonable measures were taken to ensure data quality. Nevertheless, lacking access to the actual instruments undermines confidence in the integrity of data collection procedures.

Country Sampling Strategy

The selection of countries for case analysis reflects geographic diversity, HIV/TB/malaria burden, among other factors. Providing more detail on the sampling rationale—along with analytical opportunities and limitations—would strengthen readers' ability to interpret findings, especially given the emphasis on context and comparative analysis.

Causal Analysis

The evaluation applies a light-touch realist approach, using Context-Mechanism-Outcome (CMO) configurations to link context and mechanism to observed outcomes across three grant cycle pathways. This approach captures how CE worked under different configurations.

Triangulation and Strength of Evidence

The report draws on credible qualitative and quantitative data and applies clear criteria to assess evidence strength. Multiple data sources are triangulated throughout, bolstering confidence in the findings.

Findings

The findings are well supported by evidence and present both positive and negative results that logically follow from the data. The report reflects diverse stakeholder perspectives and underlying power dynamics. Still, it could provide additional depth on critical, novel insights—for example, conflicts of interest within Country Coordinating Mechanisms (CCMs).

Comparative analyses indicate that variations in country context, political dynamics, history, and resource availability influenced the efficacy of CE's different phases. However, the report devotes significant resources discussing well-known contextual issues instead of analyzing in depth the specific contextual factors that promote or inhibit CE in different points in the cycle, which reduces clarity about transferable insights.

The ToC and CMO configurations are central to understanding not only “what worked,” but also “why” and “under what conditions.” Because these insights are only partially integrated into high-level summaries, readers unfamiliar with the full CMO analysis may miss important insights and qualifiers.

Key conclusions and recommendations

- While key conclusions and recommendations follow from the findings, gaps between critical findings and recommendations risks reducing the evaluation's strategic actionability. Where critical findings (e.g., conflict of interest in CCMs, imbalanced power dynamics within civil society) lack corresponding priority recommendations, the evaluation's value proposition is reduced.
- The evaluation surfaced important findings on political dynamics—such as frustration among CLOs about perceived lack of influence on funding allocations. However, priority recommendations do not provide concrete proposals to address identified bottlenecks (e.g. grant allocation phase). Emerging insights —such as cumulative effects of sequential grant cycles' investments on CLM and other tools on CE —do not inform key conclusions and recommendations despite the inclusion of “time” in the theory of change. As a result, stakeholders may not be prompted to tap into promising opportunities or address systemic barriers, resulting in persistence of the same challenges.
- At the time of endorsement, the IEP highlighted partial thematic overlap with other ongoing exercises (e.g., CRSS (2024-01), Imbizo (2024-02)) and recommended cross-fertilization. Lack of coordination leads to fragmentation of resources and missed opportunities to build a more cohesive organizational narrative and body of evidence on community engagement across multiple evaluations. This weakens strategic learning and may result in siloed, less than strategic reflection and decision-making moving forward.

Strengthening future evaluation processes

1. IEP would like to note significant progress made in the evaluation processes which ELO manage. As noted for the Evaluation of the Global Fund Funding Request and Grant-Making Stages of the 2023-2025 Funding Cycle – Grant Cycle 7 (GC7 FR/GM), IEP observed the end-to-end process from evaluator selection to delivery of final deliverables. IEP had access to all comments provided by ELO, secretariat and IEP along with comment trackers and responses of evaluators.
2. IEP noted with high satisfaction the high number of submitted proposals, particularly from low and middle-income countries (LMICs) firms. This is reflecting the success of all the actions taken to engage LMICs.
3. IEP suggest that conducting an analysis of the evaluation teams/proposals in terms of their origins, frequency of applying to the GF, the previous responses to their proposals c/ need to define other modalities to review high number of proposals (subgroups to review section/limited number of proposals?) may contribute to improve the processes and strengthen transparency and independence.
4. Ask the evaluators to provide reports in track change mode to help the review
5. The minutes of the recommendation workshop could be very useful if shared with the reviewers of the final report
6. The IEP commends the evaluation team for its systematic use and validation of a Theory of Change and for the detailed annex on literature that underpins it. We encourage the ELO to maintain this practice and to actively leverage these substantive and procedural insights not only within individual evaluations but also across the ELO portfolio.
7. As the Global Fund develops the learning component of the evaluation and learning strategy and workplan, it is crucial that lessons from each evaluation are integrated strategically to build institutional memory and support continuous improvement on key priorities. Evaluations such as CE, CRSS, and Imbizo share common themes—civic space, participatory mechanisms, and power dynamics—and disjointed processes can undermine the Global Fund’s ability to synthesize evidence and advance strategic goals (for example, integrating CE into broader grant-making reforms). When evaluations overlap thematically, the ELO should take proactive step to support end-to-end cross-fertilization to increase quality evaluation and learning. If lessons remain fragmented, efficiencies and valuable insights may be lost and mistakes repeated.