

A conversation with Blandine Labry, December 15, 2015

Participants

- Blandine Labry – former Finance and Operations Manager, Schistosomiasis Control Initiative
- Natalie Crispin – Senior Research Analyst, GiveWell
- Andrew Martin – Research Analyst, GiveWell

Note: These notes were compiled by GiveWell and give an overview of the major points made by Ms. Labry.

Summary

GiveWell spoke with Blandine Labry, former Finance and Operations Manager at the Schistosomiasis Control Initiative (SCI), to learn more about SCI's finances. Conversation topics included the challenges of working within the Imperial College, understaffing in the finance department, and other staffing and management issues.

Challenges of working within the Imperial College

Ms. Labry found it challenging to work in the academic setting of the Imperial College. She believes its procedures and controls are inflexible and not well suited to NGO grant management work. Ms. Labry's work was also hindered by the fact that she had very limited contact with the Imperial College finance team.

Ms. Labry believes that her resignation from SCI led to Imperial College realizing that there were problems that needed to be addressed.

Financial data management

Ms. Labry feels that SCI's data analysis and reporting capabilities are significantly limited by the Imperial College accounting system. She mentioned, for example, the difficulties involved in having to use spreadsheets to manage accounts and perform detailed analyses of large amounts of data.

Contract management

Ms. Labry noted that the often protracted nature of Imperial College's procedures can cause major delays in the contract management process. For example, funds transfers require an unreasonably high number of authorizations, and Ministry of Health (MoH) negotiations can be significantly delayed by the Imperial College's lengthy contract amendment process. Ms. Labry was frustrated by her inability to alleviate these delays.

Impact on SCI's work

Limited ability to track in-country funds

There is sometimes a backlog in the arrival of data from country partners, which makes it difficult for SCI to track and manage funds. For example, senior managers

are less able to make informed decisions about future funds transfers if they have limited information about what amounts remain in-country.

Risk of fraud at the country level

SCI also faces a risk of fraud at the country level, as MoHs often have limited capacity to manage and report on grants. SCI has made some efforts to address this risk. In some countries, such as Madagascar and Niger, rather than transfer funds directly to the MoH, they are sent through in-country non-governmental organization (NGO) partners who verify program activity logs before releasing the funds. (This process was also being set up in Tanzania when Ms. Labry was leaving SCI.) NGOs tend to have better accounting systems in place, as well as staff trained in grant monitoring. In Ethiopia, SCI hired an in-country finance manager to oversee the grant management process in collaboration with the government. SCI's risk of fraud at the country level is probably similar to other organizations doing the same type of work.

Potential solution – separate accounting package

Ms. Labry believes that SCI should have a separate accounting package, and advocated for this change throughout her employment period. Her first opportunity to discuss this recommendation with Imperial College management only came after she resigned, when she was asked to meet with Richard Viner, the Faculty Finance Officer for the Faculty of Medicine. She framed the proposal in terms of the risks the current system poses to the Imperial College.

Understaffing in the finance department

Ms. Labry observed that SCI's finance team is understaffed and overworked, which limits its capacity to deliver high-quality work.

Impact on SCI's work

Understaffing in the finance department impacts SCI's ability to ensure accountability in the granting process. For example, the finance manager has traditionally focused on ensuring funds transfers move through the Imperial College authorization process in a timely manner. Grant monitoring and reporting was generally done by program officers, and there is no regular electronic reporting process. Program officers have varying approaches and abilities in this area. Some, such as Dr. Peter Jourdan and Dr. Sarah Nogaró, are comfortable working with financial information and are consistently in control of their program's finances. They also frequently work in-country, and have the confidence to question government partners when necessary.

Potential solution – grow the finance team

Ms. Labry believes that SCI should invest in growing the finance team. Its size should be proportionate to the volume of grants it is expected to manage. With an appropriate accounting package in place, an adequately staffed finance team might include:

- 1 head of finance (must have regular, quality interactions with the Imperial College finance team)
- 2 strong accounting/finance managers
- 2-3 country liaisons (to obtain information, reconcile accounts, and build capacity)

Other staffing and management issues

Reactions to Ms. Labry's recommendations

Ms. Labry's recommendations were met with resistance from certain staff members, including some program managers. SCI's Managing Director, Dr. Wendy Harrison, returned from a leave period partway through Ms. Labry's SCI employment period. She has been very supportive of Ms. Labry's ideas, and has already taken steps to move some of them forward. Had Dr. Harrison been present throughout Ms. Labry's time at SCI, Ms. Labry might have felt less isolated in her efforts.

Staff performance issues

Any attempt to address underperformance within the finance team was not supported by management.

Other management issues

SCI is aware of some of its management weaknesses, and is taking steps to address them.

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