DONOR FUNDING TO NETWORKS: DONOR CASE STUDY A

This case study is one of nine capturing the experience and insights from a diverse set of donors about how they fund networks. It is part of an in-depth research project undertaken by Collective Mind to help both donors and networks to improve funding to and fundraising for networks.

All case studies were developed by the respondents using a provided template and have been anonymized to allow us to share them publicly. Other research products – including nine case studies of networks and a "how to" guide for network funding and fundraising – are also available at www.collectivemindglobal.org.

Each donor case study provides insights on:
- [The donor's funding strategy](#)
- [The donor's operational approach to funding/grantee management](#)
- [The challenges and reflections of the donor](#)

DONOR A PROFILE

- **Donor location**: U.S.
- **Geographic funding scope**: Global
- **Types of networks funded**: NA
- **Types of funding provided to networks**: Core, flexible funding whereby organizations can choose how they want to use the funds
- **Percentage of network grantees**: NA
- **Donor's definition of networks**: Defines networks as relationships where information, resources, experiences, and ideas are shared intentionally, creating new opportunities that would not be possible in isolation

ORGANIZATIONAL FUNDING STRATEGY

WHY DO YOU FUND NETWORKS?

- The challenges community organizations face are increasingly complex, and it's necessary to cut across issues and borders and make connections that might not otherwise happen.
- Community-based organizations and grassroots groups often do not have the time and space to step away from urgent priorities and link with peers to reflect on their work, develop meaningful relationships, or share strategies.
- Networks can help create a culture of collaboration and counter competition that can exist in the sector.
- Networks can help foster systems thinking and systems change to accelerate social change.

WHAT TYPES OF FUNDING DO YOU PROVIDE TO NETWORKS?

We provide core, flexible funding whereby organizations can choose how they wish to use the funds, and if a new need emerges, they can reprioritize the funds. We also provide additional funding for opportunities, emergencies, and advocacy through supplemental grants. Beyond what is not permitted by law, we will fund most everything but in some cases like purchasing a vehicle or building, we may require extra documentation and it's a longer process.

HOW FLEXIBLE ARE THE FUNDS THAT YOU PROVIDE TO NETWORKS?

The funds are completely flexible. We aim to be in partnership with our grantee partners for 5-6 years, but this is contingent upon our own funding sources.

WHAT CONDITIONS, IF ANY, DO YOU PLACE ON YOUR FUNDING TO NETWORKS?

None.

HOW DO YOU SELECT THE NETWORKS THAT YOU FUND?

Our process is very dependent on the nature of a new initiative and the core set of criteria that shape our investment, such as a geographical and/or thematic focus. We utilize a variety of means to identify new partners, including utilizing our existing networks, approaching previously identified prospective partners, landscape analysis, and reviewing profiles submitted on our website. We then undergo a scouting process to understand prospective organizations and networks' journeys and contexts. Scouting enables us to do our homework to educate ourselves and deepen our initial connection. This is always ideally done in person, but sometimes virtual.

For selection, we carefully consider our eligibility criteria, selection guidelines, and values. In particular, we emphasize areas like focus area alignment, local leadership, commitment to learning, understanding systems thinking, commitment to human rights-based approaches, advocacy, interest in building networks, and interest in engaging in an intentional relationship network cohort with peers. We give particular consideration to their fit and interest in working beyond a project-based funding model, what they would like to see come out of a partnership, and what they would like to bring.

We are able to fund both formal and informal organizations, those with and without registration, including those without a fiscal sponsor.

ORGANIZATIONAL FUNDING MANAGEMENT

HOW DO YOU OVERSEE THE USE OF YOUR FUNDS?

For most partners, we ask for an annual narrative and financial report. In some cases, depending on our own source of funding, we may ask for a mid-year narrative report. In reporting, we include narrative questions that ask if the community partner has developed any significant new relationships and engaged in any significant advocacy activities over the past year.

In some cases, we ask partners to complete questionnaires annually to conduct an organizational network analysis. We also document instances of collaboration we hear about in site visits, check-in meetings, convenings, and over WhatsApp groups.

DO YOU CHANGE YOUR APPROACH AND PROCEDURES TO WORK WITH NETWORKS AS COMPARED WITH OTHER GRANTEES?

There has been a shift in our approach as facilitators, conveners, and network weavers. In the past, when we hosted events for partners in the same region, there was less emphasis in forming connections that may lead to shared learning and collaboration throughout the life of a partnership with us. We now change how we approach launching an initiative and organizing convenings with this new purpose in mind. Additionally, when partners focused on a specific regional issue expressed the interest in coming together to form a network with a mission, we were able to secure funding that is supporting each individual organization and also allows for a network development consultant to support the network's establishment; this is a new opportunity for us to be a partner in the startup of a mission-focused network.

WHAT OUTPUTS, OUTCOMES, OR IMPACTS DO YOU REQUIRE NETWORKS TO DEMONSTRATE FOR THEIR FUNDING FROM YOU?

We do not set pre-defined outputs, outcomes, or impacts for each individual organization or network. For initiatives, we develop a theory of change change and track higher-level outputs and outcomes, such as number of community members reached, number of new activities or substantial programmatic changes benefitting communities, community members in decision-making, and emerging collaborations. When we implement an organizational network analysis, we look at network density, cumulative strength of ties, and size of the network beyond the grantee partners. We would consider additional elements of network analysis, but right now that is beyond our need and capacity.

Recently, one initiative facilitated a participatory learning review process that engaged all of the connection network partners, with some participating in key informant interviews,

engaging in focus groups, or receiving a grant for their own evaluation activity. The process utilized the methodology of outcome harvesting to learn how the initiative and our theory of change contributed to the topical and regional issue at hand.

WHAT DO YOU SEE AS YOUR ORGANIZATION'S ROLE WITHIN THE NETWORKS YOU FUND?

We primarily see our role as a facilitator, which includes:

- Creating safe and brave spaces for beginning network connections
- Fostering opportunities to weave and build relationships
- Seeing across the network and multiplying the perspectives, skills, and experiences related to the issues at hand
- Helping demonstrate the beauty, importance, and added advantage of collaboration

This facilitator role supports activities such as convenings, virtual workshops, coaching, collaborative learning journeys, and participatory evaluation.

We also often see ourselves as part of the network in trying to be a true partner in advancing their programmatic mission.

DONOR REFLECTIONS

WHAT ARE THE TYPICAL CHALLENGES YOU ENCOUNTER IN FUNDING NETWORKS?

Challenges encountered in funding networks:

- Not everyone immediately sees the value of networks, and building trust takes work and time.
- Many times, ideas emerge organically through the network process but we don't have additional funding to help bring them to life.
- We are often wondering what our role is. We are part of the ecosystem, but not necessarily part of the movement. We want to be true partners, but what happens when our funding stream ends and we no longer have a financial relationship with partners?
- We acknowledge that capacity development within networks is not the same as within a single organization; we are still exploring this!
- Want to intentionally bring together partners with diverse strategies and perspectives, but that can mean holding a safe and brave space for difficult and uncomfortable conversations. We have different levels of comfort around that.
- We see the partners who might be less engaged and try to find the "hooks" that may invite them to engage in ways most meaningful to them, but also being okay with there being organizations less engaged as we know they are doing valuable work. Potential though for some organizations to feel disappointed or resentful if other organizations are not showing up and they are.
- Increasing the engagement of adolescents and youth in network spaces—how might that be possible?
- Sometimes it can be tricky to know how much to nudge connections and sharing in a network and when to step back and let relationships emerge organically?
- Organizations don't always know who to bring to the table in order to balance those with decision-making roles in an organization and those who are growing, so participation is not always consistent.
- It can be hard to tell the story of our approach, its "chain of impact," and why it matters for our own evaluation purposes.
- As we explore participatory grantmaking with open calls for invitations, we see challenges in a network building approach. We don't have the opportunity to get to know the partners in-depth or assess their interest in network learning.

Challenges networks struggle with:

- Balancing day-to-day urgent work of their organizations with network learning opportunities
- Building off and sustaining the magical moments after convenings
- Moving from beyond an eagerness to share lots about what they are doing and excited about to lessons learned across their strategies and programs

- Finding resources to make bold new ideas happen
- Multiple convenings from their different funders—how can funders collaborate more?
- Outsize influence of one organization within a network and/or strong individual personalities that might be inclined to direct more than others are comfortable with

WHAT INFLUENCE DO YOU HAVE WITHIN THE NETWORK?

We recognize as a funder that we have the power to convene and influence. Some of the ways we do that include:

- Promoting collaboration over competition
- Creating new narratives around specific issues
- Sharing certain ideas and practices to strengthen civil society, such as capacity development, well-being, community engagement, and shifting power
- Amplifying voices within the network with visibility opportunities (public speaking, conferences, advocacy opportunities)
- Incentivizing collaboration sometimes through special grant opportunities or finding funding to support emerging ideas and joint actions
- Getting to know the strengths and skills of individual members and encouraging connections or sharing in specific areas, so a matchmaker of sorts

We also recognize we may influence unintentionally. We want to create space for a network to emerge organically without it feeling forced. We want our partners to feel ownership over the process and the directions it can take.

WHAT LESSONS HAVE YOU LEARNED FROM WORKING WITH NETWORKS?

- The value of facilitation and the role it plays in trust, relationships, and network weaving
- Being mindful of our own power, and clearly communicating expectations around what is required, and what is optional based on what is meaningful to partners
- Giving space for individuals from different organizations to get to know one another as people (beyond work roles)
- Powerful to bring people to one another's community, share meals together, and see their work in action
- We need to redefine the definition of success. Success isn't necessarily a large collective action or even a network that sustains itself forever.
- Need to be intentional about how we communicate network building work to our own funders and the expectations we might create. No two network initiatives will have the same journey.
- The potential and power of the margins, and connecting some organizations that might not normally connect.
- When supporting a more formal network, it may be more important to open space for relationship building than network logistics such as logos or joint statements.

HAVE YOU INTEGRATED THESE LESSONS INTO YOUR ORGANIZATION'S STRATEGY AND/OR OPERATIONS?

We have been able to integrate many valuable lessons into our strategies and operations over the past several years:

- Hiring long-term regional consultants with deep connection to culture, language, and issues to be trusted facilitators and network weavers
  - Shifting away from hiring temporary consultants to manage and facilitate convenings with regional consultants now playing that role. Allows for more in-depth and ongoing relationship building.
- Using convenings as opportunities to co-organize with community partners and integrating more intentional relationship-building components (e.g. activities integrating dreaming, play, and healing)
- Developed a process to complete organizational network analyses and have learned along the way, which has been a helpful way to "quantify" storytelling about networks; we still struggle with how to share all of this info with partners and make it more meaningful to them.
- Updated our organizational capacity index to include areas about connection, such as "We share our leadership, knowledge, tools, and contacts generously with others," "We use our large and diverse network of contacts to provide us timely assistance," and "Our collaboration with like-minded peers contributes to significant collective action within our community."
- Updated our exploring new partnerships guide to include criteria around prospective partner interest in network building and peer learning. We also included some guidance about diversity within networks and being aware of our own bias.
- Engaging partners in existing connection networks in defining subsequent phases of initiatives based on how they would like to engage with one another.
- Creating collaboration grant opportunities for two or more organizations to bring an idea to life.
- Being humble in our approach and what we articulate to our institutional donors
- Trying new approaches like a facilitated learning journey process and launching an online community space as an extra resource for connection and learning

HOW WOULD YOU CHANGE THE WAYS IN WHICH YOU FUND NETWORKS? WHAT WOULD MAKE IT EASIER TO FUND NETWORKS?

With increased funding, we could facilitate more opportunities for our team members and community partners to meet in person (be it at convenings, visiting one another's organizations, or meeting at the same conferences or trainings). Additional funding would also enable us to support ideas for collaboration that emerge, which often takes more significant funding than what we have available in our supplemental grant pool.

We'd also like to advance our know-how in network analysis with advanced metrics and software, and in ways that can really impact our network weaving and serve the partners within the network.

IN YOUR VIEW, HOW CAN DONORS BE MOST SUPPORTIVE TO NETWORKS?

Donors can be more supportive to networks by trusting the process and investing in what it takes for relationships to develop. Donors can also be more flexible, allowing funding to be adapted as new ideas, opportunities, and needs emerge. Donors might find new ways to spark and support learning around network capacity that is meaningful to network members, and find creative ways to approach evaluation. Donors can also embrace new models of networks, with shifts away from those that are formal or hierarchal in nature. Donors can also acknowledge when it is time to step back and adjust expectations if a network is not evolving in the direction that they had hoped.

We hope as power continues to shift in philanthropy that networks can more easily access donors and clearly know their expectations, and have the power to influence them based on what they need to do the work. If there's more trust, networks may be more vulnerable in acknowledging emerging challenges, so we can aim to work as partners.

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