DONOR FUNDING TO NETWORKS: DONOR CASE STUDY C

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 C PROFILE

- **Donor location**: U.S.
- **Geographic funding scope**: Sub-Saharan Africa, U.S., Chile, Panama, China, Japan, Indonesia, India, Mexico, Pacific Ocean
- **Types of networks funded**: Developed a program to foster leaders, organizations, networks, and movements that emerge from the strategies, interests, and work of their grantee partners and the fields and movements critical to their work
- **Types of funding provided to networks**: Grants support all phases of the network spectrum, from infancy and exploration to deeper development and implementation
- **Percentage of network grantees**: NA
- **Donor's definition of networks**: A type of facilitated collaboration between and across like-minded organizations that may work at the intersections of various issue areas; any type of independent group of organizations, leaders, or movements coming together to work on shared issues, challenges, and/or share specific functions, all with the end goal of creating greater impact

ORGANIZATIONAL FUNDING STRATEGY

WHY DO YOU FUND NETWORKS?

Supporting networks fits squarely into our greater commitment to funding capacity building and leadership. It is one component of our larger toolkit. We believe that one of the most powerful pathways to transformational change in our world is investing in the strengths and capacities of leaders and organizations (who are often closest to the issues their communities face). Our program team works with organizations and leaders who are existing grantee partners to the foundation to help grow their strengths, skills, and connections, offering a range of support to help amplify their impact and so that they can better achieve their mission.

Our grantmaking and support take shape in these ways:
1. We work directly with grantee partners to create customized projects that provide training, coaching, and resources to support organizational and leadership transformation — all designed to achieve a deeper mission impact.
2. We bring leaders together in cohorts, providing opportunities to strengthen individual skills, learn together, and build the collaborative relationships that are key to achieving greater impact.
3. We work in partnership with other grantmaking staff at the foundation to explore opportunities to invest in strong leaders and organizations as part of other core grantmaking efforts, thereby amplifying the impact of all our strategies.

We understand that our grantee partners are leading important work in the world. And yet, they are often challenged to find the time and resources to attend to their organization's needs or their own needs as leaders. By investing our resources in supporting strong leaders and organizations, we come ever closer to achieving a more just, equitable world that values the well-being of all people and the planet.

WHY TYPES OF NETWORKS DO YOU FUND?

We support networks that emerge from the strategies, interests, and work of our grantee partners and the fields and movements critical to their work. Our grants support all phases of the network spectrum, from infancy and exploration to deeper development and implementation. The focus of the grant is driven by the interest and needs of the partners whose work are or may be supported by a network or networks.

We also support cohort projects which can be focused on supporting emerging or existing networks. Cohort projects are facilitated, customized capacity-building investments among a group of organizations or leaders designed to strengthen their work as well as the fields, sectors, and movements they are connected to. Cohort projects are co-designed with and implemented by an intermediary partner. The first stage in a cohort grant involves assessment and planning work, which then leads to investment for

implementation. The birth of a cohort project comes from the expressed needs of our grantee-partners and can either relate to their field or sector of work or common organizational challenges.

WHAT TYPES OF FUNDING DO YOU PROVIDE TO NETWORKS?

We provide grants to networks or to support network exploration or development that are influenced by the needs and interests of our grantee partners and the emerging network at hand. For example, grants may support network convenings, training, coaching, facilitated space for peer support and community building, etc.

HOW FLEXIBLE ARE THE FUNDS THAT YOU PROVIDE TO NETWORKS?

The program team tries to ensure that grants represent the actual cost of the network's work and are as flexible as possible. Individual organization-level grants are typically 12 months long and can be extended as needed. Cohort projects that often support the development of networks are often 24 months with the stated intention of funding longer in many cases.

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

Our only conditions relate to any legal requirements such as funding having to go towards a charitable purpose.

HOW DO YOU SELECT THE NETWORKS THAT YOU FUND?

Our network-focused grants are typically designed for our grantee-partners however, depending on the topic or need, some grants are made available to non-grantee organizations working alongside or at the intersection of our grantee-partners' work. This is especially true for cohorts that are focused on strengthening fields or movements. The intermediary managing the cohort will design and administer an application process that is distributed among our grantees and if applicable, their networks. The intermediary will often work with an advisory board to help with the selection process which we try to keep simple. Although the foundation can serve as a thought partner, we do not advise on participant selection.

ORGANIZATIONAL FUNDING MANAGEMENT

HOW DO YOU OVERSEE THE USE OF YOUR FUNDS?

Typically, the program team requests a financial and narrative report on an annual basis. If the grant is 12 months, we would request a final financial report with relatively limited information (broad categories of spending) and a final narrative report. This can either be a written report in which they document the work they did, their challenges, lessons learned, and impact or via a Zoom conversation. For a 24 or 36-month grant, we would request similar reports annually. We are also available for check-in calls but they are not required.

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

If the network-related grant is for a cohort project, we partner directly with the intermediary running the cohort and we do not typically engage with cohort participants directly. If the network-related grant is an individual-level grant (capacity-building grants to one organization), we work directly with our grantee throughout the grant process and for any needed follow-up support.

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

Our overarching evaluation purpose is to learn to what extent our grants strengthen leaders, organizations, and the fields, sectors, and movements in which they work.

Each team running a cohort or network project defines for that program the specific outputs, outcomes, and impacts. We request information in grant proposals about proposed objectives and we ask that grantees report their progress against these objectives in their final reports. While objectives vary, a significant portion of our cohort projects are focused on leadership development for individuals and building networks within ecosystems. We also gather monitoring data from all programs (e.g., number of participants, names, and contact information for all participants).

Specific to cohort projects, to learn across these projects, we are doing a "deep dive" cohort study that focuses on nine cohort projects at different points in their trajectory. We did a round of research in 2020 that focused on gathering baseline data and learning how cohort intermediaries adapted to COVID and shelter-in-place. We found that programs overall did not revise their objectives, despite the significant shift in the external environment. We learned that cohort programs, because of their responsiveness to participants and their flexibility, are a good resource to support leaders in uncertain environments like shelter-in-place. We also gathered insights about how adaptations differed for new programs versus ongoing ones. New programs had the benefit of

designing with remote in mind, but the challenge of needing to facilitate relationship development entirely remotely. Existing programs needed to pivot their programming to work online but had the benefit of participants previously building strong connections through in-person convenings. The "deep dive" project will go back to the same programs in the coming years to learn about how outcomes have progressed. This research design is predicated on the understanding that cohort projects may have an immediate impact on individual participants and their relationships, but it takes more time to see outcomes at the organization, network, and movement levels.

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

We see our role as creating the space, opportunity, and funding support for organizations and leaders to engage in shared learning and connection. We rely on the work of our intermediary partners to lead and organize cohort programming based on the needs and appetites of our grantee-partners. We often play the role of thought partners to the intermediaries we work with as they navigate the assessment, design, and implementation phases of the cohort programs. Sometimes we play the role of the convener to bring other funders to the table for co-funding and partnership opportunities.

DONOR REFLECTIONS

WHAT ARE THE TYPICAL CHALLENGES YOU ENCOUNTER IN FUNDING NETWORKS?

One ongoing challenge has been the sustainability of early stage networks, and learning communities. Cohorts can run for one year or across several years (with 5 years as our longest-running cohort). Cohorts are managed by intermediary partners who take on the work of orchestration and convening. Many of our grantee-partners lack the capacity and the resources to take on this role once the cohort has ended which can lead to a loss of ongoing connection and collaboration. We are actively thinking about how a model for sustainability can be built into the original cohort design and how we can sustain an alumni network.

More established networks have sought our support for visioning/strategic planning, leadership development, incorporating equitable principles into their work, effective advocacy, and more recently, planning for the safety and security of leaders and activists.

WHAT INFLUENCE DO YOU HAVE WITHIN THE NETWORK?

We may influence the design of a training opportunity based on the available resources we can provide or past experience of what has worked well in other cohorts. However, we rely heavily on the goals and needs of our grantee-partners to shape their experience. Usually. this discovery occurs during the assessment phase when a selected intermediary partner engages potential cohort participants in various assessment activities to understand the context, needs, and goals of the cohort. In general, we maintain a 'hands-off' philosophy and trust our intermediary partners and cohort participants to lead their own work. Since we work to strengthen the capacity of a group of organizations or leaders to carry out their missions, then by proxy we hope to strengthen the fields/movements in which they work.

WHAT LESSONS HAVE YOU LEARNED FROM WORKING WITH NETWORKS?

- It's vital to meet organizations and leaders where they are. Sometimes, even if we see the potential for a group of changemakers to organize, as funders, our role is to provide the space for this connection to happen if it is asked for by our partners. Sometimes this can lead to collaboration or an appetite to keep connecting while other times, organizations/leaders aren't ready or don't have the capacity to move on an issue together and the group will dissolve following shared learning.

- Collaboration may take many forms, all of which are progress. Sometimes collaboration can be traditional such as aligning on and working towards a shared advocacy goal. Other times, collaboration takes a more flexible approach which can take the form of organization leaders getting together for monthly roundtable dinners. Although the latter may seem less impactful from an outside perspective, we have found that creating opportunities for leaders to connect with each other, even informally, resulted in strong relationship building which then led to more traditional collaboration in future years.
- Creating and funding opportunities for leaders/organizations to connect in-person at various points throughout a cohort allowed for participants to fully connect, participate, be present, and make lasting relationships. Although this model shifted during the pandemic, the need for in-person connection remains highly desired among leaders and organizations.
- Organizational turnover leads to loss of knowledge and connection to the cohort's network. In response, organizations are encouraged to invite multiple staff to participate in cohort programs for sustained learning and impact.
- Some level of participant co-design can lead to stronger participant engagement and a more accurate understanding of participant goals and needs. Although true co-design may not always be achieved due to factors such as the limited capacity of participants, avenues for ongoing feedback need to be integrated throughout the assessment, design, and implementation process.
- Finding the right intermediary partner to carry out cohort facilitation is one key to program success. In our experience, we have had intermediary partners cause harm to participants as it related to Justice, Equity, Diversity & Inclusion (JEDI) principles. Since then, we have worked to be even more mindful of partnering with intermediaries who truly understand the communities and contexts they are stepping into.

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

Yes, the program team is constantly working to integrate any lessons learned into our strategy and operations. Across the foundation's programs, there is a growing appetite and understanding of the power of funding and supporting movements and working towards system-level change.

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

When we invest in the strengths, skills, and connections of people working together for positive change, we invest in the power of their ideas and bold leadership to unlock the solutions our world deeply needs. We invest in the strength of our partners so that they are better equipped to innovate and nimbly respond to opportunities and challenges. When we devote our resources to the core needs of leaders and organizations, they can open new possibilities, strengthening the foundation for transformative change within their

organizations and their ability to reshape the world for the greater good. Communities that have historically been ignored, oppressed, or underinvested in often experience the brunt of the world's problems. Yet, they also have first-hand knowledge of solutions to those problems. By investing in leaders, organizations, networks, fields, and movements from these communities, they have the opportunity to create a better future for all.

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