



## DONOR FUNDING TO NETWORKS: DONOR CASE STUDY F

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](http://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 F PROFILE

- **Donor location:** Europe, India, and North America
- **Geographic funding scope:** Global
- **Types of networks funded:** Self-identified networks, alliances, movements, partnerships, groups, etc.
- **Types of funding provided to networks:** Mostly core funding, project support, and capacity building
- **Percentage of network grantees:** Approximately 20%
- **Donor's definition of networks:** Maintain a very loose definition of a network; partly self-defined through the partner, but a network also requires a shared mission and a collective objective



## ORGANIZATIONAL FUNDING STRATEGY

### WHY DO YOU FUND NETWORKS?

We fund networks to support the field infrastructure, create greater economies of scale, as well as to build a field through enabling resource and knowledge sharing, collective development, a coordinated position, and increased reach.

### WHAT TYPES OF NETWORKS DO YOU FUND?

We fund self-identified networks, alliances, movements, partnerships, groups, etc. The networks are varied and are on a continuum between loosely organized and highly centralized. Some of these networks are secretariat-led, others membership-led, and some are discrete entities, while others are a subset of a larger organization. All have appropriate and different governance structures.

### WHAT TYPES OF FUNDING DO YOU PROVIDE TO NETWORKS?

Funding is usually directed towards coordination, relationship and capacity building, and network maintenance.

In 2019, we partnered with another philanthropic partner and initiated a project involving a cohort of networks essential to advancing one of our program's missions. The cohort, which consisted initially of six members, now counts 11 members. The rationale of consolidating our work on networks under one project and one partner was that the partner would be able to work with networks in a curated, personalized way and provide bespoke capacity building and networking, supporting the development of these networks.

Alongside our partner, we found that networks lacked:

- flexible financial resources;
- secretariat and network-wide capacity; and
- the connections and opportunities to advance their work.

In response to these identified gaps, our partner, with our support, provides the networks in this cohort with:

- multi-year flexible grants;
- tailored network strengthening support; and
- connections and insight into the broader sector.

### HOW FLEXIBLE ARE THE FUNDS THAT YOU PROVIDE TO NETWORKS? HOW LONG-TERM ARE THOSE FUNDS?

Our grantmaking for network and organizational strengthening are widely recognized as being flexible and long-term.



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

There are no particular conditions, but there is an eye to the active participation of the members in the network. This condition is fudged as not all members are expected to be equally active. However, there remains a certain expectation of an active, authentic network which delivers on its stated action plans.

## **HOW DO YOU SELECT THE NETWORKS THAT YOU FUND?**

The networks we fund are selected through three main criteria: thematic relevance, geographic reach, and membership engagement. We also work with networks with a long-standing partnership with us that support our program strategies and objectives. There is also ongoing work to consider criteria and processes that are owned by community members.



## ORGANIZATIONAL FUNDING MANAGEMENT

### HOW DO YOU OVERSEE THE USE OF YOUR FUNDS?

We oversee through annual reports (financial report plus narrative). The format can be determined by the grantee. Grant and relationship management is also undertaken through regular calls with the partner (in-person has not been feasible due to COVID-19 restrictions).

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

This applies most strongly to our work on capacity strengthening, by applying tailored approaches that acknowledge the complexities of - and distinctions between - networks and other collaborative structures. For example, our partner worked with a network consultant in the early stages of the initiative to undertake participatory network diagnostics of network partners, which helped to identify several common challenges (specific to networks), such as member engagement and monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) for networks.

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

Some outputs and outcomes are useful, including number of members, common positions, representation of groups or geographies in the sector, demonstrable progress towards own thematic action plans and how they meet programmatic and capacity building objectives. For example, one of our initiatives is guided by a learning framework which outlines a theory of change and key learning questions which help us to test, learn, and adapt our approaches. As such, our work is much more heavily weighted towards qualitative data, which emerges from our interactions with partners and what we are witnessing within the wider field. We do not require partners to report on any specific outputs/outcomes/impact indicators - we leave this open to them to determine and share with us, depending on their own learning frameworks. We do, however, adopt qualitative analysis methods to capture examples or emerging impacts that speak to the initiative's overall goal of stronger, more effective, sustainable, and connected networks. We are currently exploring how to strengthen our own internal indicators and metrics, as well as integrate additional learning questions determined collectively by network members of the cohort.

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

This really depends on the network, and the nature of the organization as a partner. We don't participate with governance in the same way we participate with re-granters; the



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engagement tends to be 'softer' e.g. representation support at network events to lend credibility. With some partners, our funding contributes towards network diagnostic processes and one-on-one advisory support, curated peer learning and engagement, network leadership support, and networking opportunities.



## DONOR REFLECTIONS

### WHAT ARE THE TYPICAL CHALLENGES YOU ENCOUNTER IN FUNDING NETWORKS?

Some challenges include the tension between the Secretariat and members, particularly how resources are divided. These resources include money, information, common advocacy positions, and skills. Another challenge is policy consistency and resisting compromises on advocacy that create a race to the bottom. Ensuring a balance between highly engaged members, and those that are less so also presents a difficulty, particularly as it relates to representational deficit, as those organizations with more resources tend to be better represented. It can also be challenging to mediate and compromise when working with a more diverse cohort of networks, both with regards to who they represent and how they are structured and operate.

### WHAT INFLUENCE DO YOU HAVE WITHIN THE NETWORK?

Although we do not sit in any governance positions and are conscious to maintain a respectful distance and not use that influence to pursue an agenda, there is an inherent power dynamic that exists between donors and their partner organizations which we try to mitigate in our approach to relationships (trust-based), in the modality of funding (general operating support), and by centering grantee ownership into our approaches to capacity strengthening and community-building and learning. We are also experimenting with greater delineation between the funding and capacity strengthening side of our work to minimize that power dynamic further.

### WHAT LESSONS HAVE YOU LEARNED FROM WORKING WITH NETWORKS?

One key issue that has emerged is that of limited membership engagement. In more detail, the networks struggle to ensure participation and involvement by large proportions of their memberships and end up being driven instead by the governing body and/or by the Secretariat. What happens then is that networks start looking more like organizations and less like networks.

Related to the issue of membership engagement, most of the networks we work with are also struggling to achieve engagement of local, grassroots actors in decision-making and shared advocacy. Nevertheless, all identify this as a key priority.

One final learning is around formal and informal networks; our work to date has been focused on formal, structured networks or collaborations, which might be limiting our potential for impact in terms of fostering greater collaboration and collective impact across the field.



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

In general, an operational awareness of limits and challenges of funding mechanisms has been integrated into our strategy. We have also learnt not to instrumentalize a network, and instead be respectful of its constitutional objectives rather than utilizing it for our objectives (e.g. as a resource distribution mechanism) as this can have negative impacts on the network itself. A valuable assessment of the health of a network is the voluntary, spontaneous growth of a network as a signifier of the value added for members from the network. These lessons are informing the types of support we provide network partners through the learning community.

## **HOW WOULD YOU CHANGE THE WAYS IN WHICH YOU FUND NETWORKS?**

In addition to the previous answer, we are also exploring how our work can be more open to informal networks or groups, including emerging groups led by those with lived experience.

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

The same ways in which donors are supportive to all grantees, such as being respectful and flexible, maintaining an arm's length from operational questions, and operating on a longer timeline. Additionally, tracking output through the value of the network rather than specific collective impact, e.g. policy change, is another way in which to be supportive. Donors should also invest more prominently in core funding, collaboration, and networking, and apply a stronger systems-lens to their MEL, to understand the value of a given network within a broader ecosystem. On the flip side, networks could also strengthen their own MEL/storytelling (beyond reporting on outputs, such as number of network members) to influence donors and help them make the case for support internally and in wider donor networks.