

Good Funder Practices: Promoting Equitable Partnerships with Civil Society Organizations

This brief describes lessons learned from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation's [international reproductive health strategy to support local advocacy in sub-Saharan Africa](#). This strategy continued the foundation's focus on ensuring that women can decide whether and when to have children. The strategy's goal envisioned a vibrant sector of local civil society organizations (CSOs) that can capably and positively influence the family planning and reproductive health (FPRH) policies and funding decisions of their own national governments and of international donors. Most of the foundation's grantees were international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) based in the United States or Europe. These INGOs served as intermediaries who provided sub-grants and other forms of capacity support to CSO sub-grantees founded and chartered in their respective countries and directly engaged in FPRH advocacy. The foundation also made direct grants to a small set of well-established African-led CSOs with a strong record of FPRH advocacy work.

As it implemented this strategy, the foundation gathered lessons about entrenched power imbalances and identified power-sharing practices that support equitable partnerships with CSOs.

Based on a [developmental learning and evaluation process](#) that accompanied the strategy's implementation over five years (2016-2021), the lessons and practices in this brief reflect and contribute to efforts in philanthropy and the international development field to shift power from funders towards local CSOs. The good funder practices described in this brief – some of which are reflected in the foundation's [Global Reproductive Equity Strategy](#) for 2022-2026 – are relevant to private and community foundations, bilateral and multilateral donors, intermediaries like INGOs, and others who provide financial support to CSOs.

Embracing funder flexibility

Simply put, funder flexibility is an expression of power sharing. By relinquishing control over the “who, what, when, where, and how” of CSOs' work, funders and intermediaries enable CSOs to respond to changes in the context and give them room to experiment. Funder flexibility also involves giving up some of the control exerted through rigid and burdensome funding processes. These may include complex and time-consuming application procedures and financial, programmatic, and evaluative reporting requirements that drain CSO capacity better directed towards its advocacy efforts – and in some cases preclude well-qualified CSOs from seeking grants in the first place.

Good Practices

1. Make grants of 3-5 years or more instead of offering short-term support. By committing to multi-year agreements, funders and intermediaries relinquish some of their power over CSOs, freeing CSOs from frequent, time-consuming grant renewal applications and reports. Longer-term agreements offer greater financial stability and job security, helping to reduce turnover in key staff. Retaining staff provides programmatic continuity and can allow the CSO to sustain benefits from staff development; capacity that has been “built” through training, mentoring, and on-the-job experience stays with the organization. Multi-year financial commitments also give CSOs breathing room to undertake longer-term strategic planning, properly address multi-year advocacy efforts, and think through long-term questions around succession planning and strategic investment.

2. Provide unrestricted funding. Unrestricted support gives CSOs the power to determine how best to use funds to advance their organizational goals and capacity. With this level of flexibility, CSOs can pivot their activities in response to shifts in community needs, national and local context, or advocacy opportunities. Unrestricted support also contributes to CSOs' ability to cover the costs of staff, office space, and other administrative costs not tied to a specific project but nonetheless crucial to basic organizational functioning.

3. If a funder or intermediary cannot provide unrestricted funding, then it should at least give CSOs power to make appropriate strategic shifts as needed. CSOs are better able to respond to changes in the advocacy environment when they have the authority to nimbly shift activities and budget allocations without interference, delays, or bureaucratic hurdles from funders or the intermediaries managing sub-grants.

4. Use simpler and more flexible application and reporting processes. Funders and the intermediaries they partner with can offer simpler application forms in multiple languages to encourage a broader range of CSOs to apply. They can also experiment with oral reporting options and giving CSOs more flexibility to report in ways that resonate with their understanding of the work and its impact. Funders can also consider reducing the frequency of reports. Simplified and flexible application and reporting processes free up CSOs' resources to do the work they were funded to do.

Enabling transparency and inclusivity

Funders hold power over CSOs in two "currencies": money and information. Much of the power imbalance in funding relationships stems from funders' control over who receives money – and who does not. But funders also exert power by controlling the flow of information. When funders and intermediaries are not transparent about their grant-making decisions or do not communicate in a timely way, CSOs lack the information they need to plan and execute their activities effectively. Poor information-sharing about the funder's strategy and portfolio of grantees and sub-grantees, as well as inattention to knowledge-sharing about developments in the field more broadly, can undercut CSOs' ability to work effectively. CSO partners are also put at a disadvantage when they are excluded from grant negotiations between an intermediary and a funder. Lack of transparency around the intermediary's budget and grant terms – and lack of CSO input in shaping the scope of work – makes it more difficult for CSOs to exercise power in their relationships with intermediaries and to hold intermediaries accountable for their commitments and for good partnership practices.

Good Practices

1. Establish an inclusive grant application and renewal process. Funders who are providing support via intermediaries should include representatives of the intermediary *and* its CSO partners in joint meetings to discuss and agree upon priorities and budgets. Funders should ensure that the grant negotiations include the staff who actually manage relationships with CSO sub-grantees – not simply the executive director or the organization's liaison with funders. Pay similarly close attention to who is speaking for the CSO; invite the staff person who manages the work being funded, not simply the CSO's executive director. Be aware of the history and depth of relationships among these parties if possible. The quality of these relationships can affect power dynamics and the candor of the conversation. Allow sufficient time for this inclusive process so that all parties can contribute.

2. Be transparent and communicate in a clear and timely way about decision-making criteria and grant decisions. Funders' and intermediaries' responsibilities include providing timely information to those who seek or receive their support. This includes sharing the criteria used to decide whether to grant or renew support, as well as offering timely and constructive explanations of decisions to end funding. It also means communicating promptly and transparently about the timing of grant decisions and disbursements so that CSOs are not left in limbo.

Encouraging feedback on power dynamics and funder behavior

Even when funders' practices reflect flexibility, transparency, and inclusivity, a power imbalance will still shape CSOs' ability to offer honest feedback. CSOs hesitate to provide critical feedback or express disagreement with their funders because they fear they will lose funding – or be branded as a “troublemaker.” Even well-established CSOs with multiple funding sources are wary of the risks of pushing back when they disagree with funders or the intermediaries who manage sub-grants to the CSOs. This hinders CSOs' ability to be honest about any concerns regarding funder or intermediary behavior, making it difficult to surface and address issues that affect the success of the partnership. The absence of honest feedback also limits funders' ability to learn about the work they are supporting.

Good Practices

- 1. Create opportunities for CSOs to confer and collaborate in sharing their feedback.** For example, a funder can organize a gathering where CSO partners are able to candidly discuss partnership dynamics *without* the funder present. Based on their discussion, the CSOs can jointly produce a group memo offering their collective feedback to the funder. This approach gives CSOs “power in numbers,” offering a level of protection not available to an individual CSO providing critical feedback.
- 2. Commission a third-party evaluation.** Confidentiality and trust-building between the evaluators and the CSOs are critical for eliciting honest feedback. Evaluations with multiple touch points, as opposed to a single feedback opportunity at the end, can help ensure that the funder hears and responds to CSO perspectives during the partnership. Evaluators should also invite CSO input on evaluation products.
- 3. Organize a space for honest discussions with a neutral facilitator.** It can be difficult for CSOs and funders (or intermediaries) to engage directly with one another about sensitive power dynamics or partnership challenges. One response: organize a space for discussion facilitated by someone who isn't directly involved in the grant decisions or grant relationships. The facilitator's role is to level the power balance so that CSO staff and funder (or intermediary) staff are equal participants in a discussion about partnership quality and challenges.
- 4. Encourage whistle blowing - and protect whistle blowers.** Establish an email or WhatsApp address for complaints about abuses of power or partnership challenges. It should be monitored by a third-party organization, not the funder.
- 5. Invest time in developing trusting relationships with CSO partners.** Trust-building requires a funder to intentionally and repeatedly demonstrate to CSOs that they can voice concerns about the funder's behavior or partnership challenges without fear of retribution. Building trusting relationships is a complement – not a substitute – for the other practices described above.

Disrupting practices grounded in racist and colonial beliefs that privilege Global North ways of working and knowing

Funders based in the Global North may consciously or unconsciously reflect norms grounded in racist and colonial beliefs. These norms inform assumptions about qualifications and organizational effectiveness, leading funders to attribute greater skill, professionalism, and integrity to INGOs based in the Global North than to African organizations of equal or higher caliber. These norms also devalue African CSOs' expertise rooted in the social, political, and cultural context in which the work is carried out. This contributes to donors' bias towards funding organizations led by white people and/or based in the Global North, while Black-led organizations remain marginalized and under-resourced. And it privileges Global North definitions of what "success" looks like and how to achieve it.

Good Practices

- 1. Establish an advisory group of African civil society representatives to inform grantmaking decisions.** This enables funders to benefit from the knowledge that advisors have about the context, communities, and practices of grant applicants. It also creates space and opportunities to question and disrupt grantmaking assumptions and practices that privilege a Global North or white perspective. To authentically share power, funders must accord genuine decision-making authority to such advisors rather than simply creating the appearance of consultation with civil society representatives.
- 2. Dismantle norms that position the Global North as "expert."** Funders and intermediaries based in the Global North can in some cases provide valuable technical expertise that helps CSOs advance their work. But funders should dismantle the hierarchical model that assumes that the holder of resources (typically donors and INGOs) is also the holder of relevant knowledge and expertise. The definition of "expert" should center the expertise of African CSOs, technical support providers, and community leaders, including their deep knowledge of what will work or be relevant in specific cultural, political, and social contexts. This means bringing African experts to the foreground – whether that's in developing appropriate strategies, supporting CSOs' capacity-strengthening objectives, or contributing to policymaking discussions in national, regional, or international forums. It means putting CSOs in the position of selecting the technical support partners they want to work with, rather than positioning INGO intermediaries as the default source of technical support. It also means rethinking ideas of what makes a "fundable" organization, recognizing the values that are implicitly conveyed by funding criteria and application questions.
- 3. Elevate conversations about power, inequity, and the colonial and racist roots of current funding practices - and engage in philanthropic advocacy to encourage other funders to shift their practices.** This can contribute to the longtime efforts of CSO leaders, activists, and others to call out and dismantle racist and colonial practices in international development. It can also help embolden some CSOs to question, challenge, and demand more equitable treatment by funders and INGO intermediaries.