



MAKING FUNDING WORK FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

What we have learned in conversation with funders, youth organisations and NGOs

The Donor Dialogues is a series convened by the Youth Collective aimed to create exchanges, interactive discussion and connections between youth civil society groups (CSO) and funders to advocate for a more resilient, well-funded and sustainable youth CSO sector. Since March 2021, we have convened 9 Donor Dialogues engaging over 328 young people, donors, CSOs, private sector and academics. **Here is what we learned about how to transformatively resource youth organisations to amplify change:**

FUNDING IS A JUSTICE ISSUE.



Addressing the most deep-rooted issues today will require a radical political shift in thinking, assumptions and policies about where and to whom development aid is distributed. Despite some progress, there are still inconsistencies between what is top of the development agenda and how funding is distributed to address these issues. For example, even though ‘gender equality’ has been part of the development policy agenda for years, between 2017–2019, feminist movements received less than 1% of multilateral and bilateral funding towards gender equality (AWID 2020). At the same time, these tendencies perpetuate dangerous narratives about certain groups or organisations being “too small / informal / inexperienced” to receive funding. However, young organisers are well positioned to respond to present challenges, and with the right support there is huge potential to transform the breath, width and ways in which change happens. It all comes down to how these efforts are resourced – funding is a justice issue in and of itself.

YOUTH CSOS WANT MORE OUT OF GRANT- MAKING THAN JUST FUNDING.

Young people have voiced time again that they want ‘true partnerships’ with donors, meaning support that recognises and funds time, creativity, networks, tools, and collaboration – essential to deliver their work. Youth CSOs will thrive with deep and equitable relationships built on trust and authentic connection, where they can communicate their values and share their challenges openly and honestly. This requires donors to move beyond short-term funding and lean into sustainable funding partnerships built for the long-term. Deeply rooted social change and civil society organising rarely happens in the time and project cycles set out by donors and funders.

“Donors should be more aware of context; youth engagement is not just about calling young people for a meeting. It should be active, participatory, diverse and flexible. Projects come and go, but funding needs to be sustainable.”

Sophie Nabukenya, Executive Director of Hands of Hope Initiative Uganda

YOUNG PEOPLE MUST BE SEEN AS THE LEADERS AND POLITICAL ACTORS THEY ARE, AND NOT AS AID RECIPIENTS.

Youth contributions and expertise should not be sidelined into ‘youth funding/programmes’, and instead youth voices should crosscut grantmaking. Once donors and INGOs leave, it is grassroots groups and movements that will inherit the work at the community level, and thus funding practises need to reflect the values of equity, sustainability and trust from the onset. Funders need to reimagine accountability in grantmaking to further the work of CSOs in a way that feels more like mutual accountability and less like surveillance. It is not about how much money funders offer, but how the funding process is structured – is it flexible? Unrestricted? Does it consider the need to strengthen capacities locally? Does it lean into local expertise? For as long as these dynamics are not redressed, youth civil society will not be adequately supported to deliver their work.

“As a funder new to the space of supporting youth movements, after this event I will try to align values with actions, and give more thought to the Why and How of funding, to create mechanisms for young people to lead.”

Funder at a Donor Dialogue event



MIND THE INFORMATION GAP.



There are significant ‘entry barriers’ into accessing information about funding opportunities that must be urgently reversed. Youth CSOs have expressed that funding information is almost exclusively online, without downloadable formats, which requires good connections to the internet. Funding calls aimed at specific regions are also often not available in local languages, giving bigger, English-speaking organisations a significant advantage in accessing funding. Information about grants is also often scattered, confusing and overly-technical, using expressions like “bridge funding”, “seed funding” or “fiscal sponsor”. These challenges often get forgotten when advocating for better and more democratic funding practises, yet they are the first barrier to equitable funding.

“We must continue to support youth movements and unregistered organisations with flexible funding and easy and accessible application formats.”

Participant at a Donor Dialogue event

THERE ARE NO SHORTCUTS OR REPLACEMENTS TO INCLUSIVE DECISION-MAKING.

There is much to gain from peer review grantmaking processes that include advisors from different backgrounds, to help democratise the funding process from design to decision making, management, supervision and even mentorship. This might also help expand the capacities of donors to fund other regions and civil society in a wider variety of languages and contexts. As a donor, early consultation through participatory grantmaking can ensure unique insight into who is doing the best work in a given context, rather than who can best present their work in a proposal. It is truly the only way to ensure young people’s lived experiences and unique insights help make better decisions about how and where money should be spent. It is time to get away from structuring grantmaking as ‘one decision in time’ and instead see it as an ongoing process, where the power is handed to those closest to the issues at hand.

EXTRACTIVIST GRANTMAKING KILLS POWER-SHIFT.

There is a deficit of trust between grantor and grantee, and it gets expressed through overburdening reporting, extensive applications and bureaucratic steps, which drain time and effort on managerial and administrative tasks.

“If we trust the people we’re funding, we will naturally gravitate towards unrestricted funding. We will trust them to do what they do best and lean into their expertise.”

Lior Ipp, Chief Executive Officer at the Roddenberry Foundation

When the process is cumbersome and the relationship developed between grantor and grantee is not equal, it breeds transactional-based relationships over reciprocal collaboration. Instead, the administrative burden of grantmaking should be placed on those with the most resources, capacity and power. Specifically:

- Application processes should aim to be short, only asking for essential information to help make decisions and enable quick response, prioritising feedback (at the individual level where possible) to support the learning of unsuccessful applicants. They should also draw on multimedia and other ways of capturing information, such as video, to eliminate advantages based on English proficiency or proposal writing.
- The identification and sharing of learning should be prioritised over donor-serving, overburdening reporting and extractive MEL practises, through two way feedback loops. This ensures accountability to the work delivered above accountability to the donor. A consideration for donors is to adapt reporting requirements depending on the size of the grantee (and the grant), or work through intermediaries.
- Youth CSOs feel that while they spend lots of time and energy sharing their ideas and experiences with funders to inform future granting, they are excluded from applying due to unattainable eligibility requirements.
- Funders can decolonise application processes by ridding grantmaking from English jargon and expectations of technical skills that are unfairly prioritised by the Global North. Funders must recognise that eligibility criteria can force youth groups to formalise and conform to donor expectations. Youth organisations should be able to develop in ways that stay true to their vision and values.

Changing grantmaking is a steady and incremental process, but it has to start now!

Donors and funders should be more ambitious and braver about how we financially support civil society, recognising there is unlearning and relearning to do along the way from and with grantees. The important thing is to get going, do it transparently and do it bravely! There is value in failing forward.

“If we truly want to make social change happen, we need to fund transformative organising and create a funding ecosystem that supports it.”

Participant at a Donor Dialogue event

