

Better Funding Case Study

A *feminist and decolonial* approach to funding:

***IM Swedish Development Partner* in practice**





Context and case study approach

This case study explores how IM Swedish Development Partner (IM) puts its feminist, anti-racist and decolonial values into practice through its funding mechanisms, programme design and institutional relationships.

Beyond statements of principles, IM has developed a set of coherent practices that prioritise equity, the redistribution of power and leadership rooted in territories. This approach is implemented even within the inherent limitations to public funding, demonstrating what is possible when values are translated into concrete decisions.

The analysis places particular emphasis on its relational approach, centred on mutual trust, and on how funding and accompaniment are integrated as part of a broader ecosystem of change.



From principles to practice

At IM, feminist, anti-racist and decolonial principles are not understood as abstract values, but as frameworks that guide concrete decisions: who to work with, how funding is provided, what is prioritised and how learning takes place.

This approach is reflected in a series of key practices:

Selection of partner organisations through a values-centred approach

IM applies these principles from the outset of the relationship, through tools such as Strategic Choice, which prioritise: contextual analysis, alignment of strategies and values, and the potential for collective action, over purely administrative criteria or organisational capacity.

From a feminist and anti-racist perspective, IM prioritises organisations led by rights holders, particularly:

- ✓ *Women and girls*
- ✓ *Indigenous peoples*
- ✓ *Youth*
- ✓ *LGBTIQ+ people*
- ✓ *People with disabilities and other historically excluded groups*

This approach challenges traditional funding logics that tend to favour larger organisations or those closer to international donors.



Flexible funding as a tool for redistributing power

One of IM's most important decisions is to prioritise institutional and flexible funding, allowing partner organisations to:

- ✓ Define their own strategic priorities.
- ✓ Invest in organisational strengthening.
- ✓ Sustain long-term processes and collective action.

This approach reduces donor control over the definition of priority areas of work, allowing the agenda to be shaped by partner organisations themselves. In doing so, it challenges project-based fragmentation and recognises the political and organisational autonomy of partners.

A feminist and intersectional perspective

IM applies an intersectional perspective that recognises how different forms of exclusion – gender, ethnicity, age, disability, sexual orientation and class – interact to produce inequality.

This translates into:

- ✓ Prioritising women, girls and youth as strategic groups.
- ✓ Supporting initiatives led by Indigenous and rural women.
- ✓ Strengthening collective action as a tool to transform social norms and power structures.

IM understands feminism not only as inclusion, but as the transformation of power relations, including the involvement of men as allies where appropriate.



Learning and accountability centred on partners

IM uses tools such as Progress Tracker, AdaptaMeter and joint analysis sessions to prioritise learning and adaptation rather than control.

These practices:

- ✓ Incorporate direct feedback from partners and rights holders.
- ✓ Recognise local knowledge as a legitimate source of evidence.
- ✓ Allow programme decisions to be adjusted based on lived experience.

This approach challenges colonial practices of extractive and top-down monitoring.

Partner ecosystems and transnational collective action

IM fosters ecosystems where organisations share learning, develop joint strategies and strengthen their capacity for advocacy.

Within this model, IM shifts from being the focal point to acting as a facilitator, supporting existing and emerging synergies and enabling horizontal networks led by partners themselves.



“Do No Harm” and conflict sensitivity approaches

In highly complex contexts such as occupation, war or polarisation, IM uses tools that enable it to:

- ✓ Analyse how interventions may reinforce or challenge existing power structures.
- ✓ Mitigate potential harm to marginalised groups.
- ✓ Adapt programme decisions to complex political contexts.



How does this approach translate into funding practice?

Core Support without fences

IM's main funding mechanism is institutional funding (Core Support without fences), characterised by:

- ✔ Not being restricted to specific projects.
- ✔ Being transferred to the organisation's main bank account.
- ✔ Allowing funds to be used according to the organisation's own priorities.

Organisations present annual plans and budgets while maintaining autonomy over the strategic use of resources. In addition:

- ✔ They use their own systems and management formats.
- ✔ They are not required to open separate bank accounts.
- ✔ They receive accompaniment based on prior analysis and ongoing engagement.

While this is IM's preferred approach, it respects partners' decisions when they opt for other types of funding.



Power Funding (pilot practice)

Power Funding emerges from a key question for IM:

Can we fund better than through institutional funding (Core Support without fences)?

Core funding has improved how civil society is supported, providing partners with greater flexibility and stability. However, IM's experience shows that, on its own, it does not always lead to deeper change.

In contexts such as Palestine, partners highlighted that even core funding can involve certain pressures: to professionalise, to produce documentation, to align with donor expectations. This shapes organisational behaviour, shifting time and resources towards plans and reports, rather than towards communities.

Building on these insights, IM and its partners piloted an alternative approach: ***Power Funding***. For one year, two organisations – a well-established organisation and an informal network – were supported under different conditions:

- ✓ Without requiring proposals.
- ✓ Without detailed budgets.
- ✓ Without reports directed to a single donor.

The model was based on contractual agreements, auditing and continuous dialogue.



An external evaluation showed clear results:

- ✓ Partners became more responsive to the people they work with.
- ✓ As donor requirements took up less space, attention shifted towards context and emerging needs.
- ✓ Priorities were defined more by communities.
- ✓ Partners were able to respond to emerging needs in real time.

The main lesson is clear: **flexibility alone is not enough.**

If the aim is to redistribute power, it is also necessary to:

- ✓ Reduce control over how priorities are defined and implemented.
- ✓ Sustain high levels of trust.
- ✓ Maintain ongoing dialogue.
- ✓ Be willing to learn from both success and failure.

Power Funding is not a model that can be replicated mechanically. However, it shows that funding the organisation as a whole – and expanding partners’ decision-making space – can strengthen both relevance and the results.

“What power funding primarily does is strengthen the sovereignty of organizations, enabling them to have ownership over their impact and, even more importantly, their own narrative. It gave partners the freedom to act according to their own priorities and to speak up against injustices affecting their communities, without having to censor themselves or conform to the ‘politically correct’ terminology often expected of them.”

Dalia Hamayel,
IM Palestine Representative



Collective Allocation of Funds (pilot in Guatemala)

This innovative pilot, to be implemented in 2026–2027, enables partner organisations to participate directly in the allocation of resources. It is rooted in IM’s decolonial approach, as it challenges and reshapes the traditional hierarchical logic of international cooperation, where decision-making power over funding is typically concentrated with the donor.

By shifting decisions on the allocation of annual grants to partner organisations themselves, IM moves away from the pyramidal dynamics that have historically reproduced relationships of dependency and control. In doing so, the process contributes to a tangible shift in power. It challenges the implicit assumption that those who provide resources should hold the greatest decision-making authority, and instead recognises the autonomy, contextual knowledge and political leadership of local organisations as central to transformative change.

The process includes:

- ✓ Collective reflection on power and funding.
- ✓ Open discussion of budget proposals.
- ✓ Space for adjustment and dialogue.
- ✓ Collective decision-making.

Beyond a financial mechanism, it is a political and relational process that redistributes decision-making power, strengthens trust and shared responsibility, and fosters dynamics of solidarity rather than competition.



Relationships and long-term commitments

IM is committed to long-term relationships that go beyond funding cycles.

A recent example emerged during budget cuts to the main funder of IM's Global Programme. In a context of high uncertainty and the possibility of significant organisational restructuring, IM made a clear decision:

To prioritise the continuity of those partner organisations highly aligned with its mission, vision and strategy, and to sustain these partnerships using its own funds.

Internally, this group is referred to as “IM Essentials” (essential partners).

This approach reflects a broader commitment: support for certain organisations does not depend solely on the availability of external funding, but on relationships built over time, grounded in strategic alignment and mutual trust.

IM's clarity and agility in this context reflect an institutional stance:

- ✓ Prioritising relationships over projects.
- ✓ Sustaining commitments even in contexts of financial constraint.



BETTER FUNDING LENS:

Beyond an operational decision, this reflects a political stance on how cooperation is understood and practised. It signals a commitment to prioritising long-term relationships, recognising partner organisations as strategic allies, and investing in more just and equitable ways of working.

In this sense, the concept of “essential partners” does not simply name an internal category. It reflects a different understanding of commitment within international cooperation that is not defined solely by funding cycles, but by alignment, trust and shared purpose.



Flexibility, learning and accountability

IM puts its relational approach into practice through accompaniment (commonly referred to as monitoring) oriented towards learning.

Follow-up is approached as a space for joint reflection, analysis of processes, challenges and changes, and programme adaptation, prioritising learning over control and rigid compliance.

This approach is complemented by the development of a partner ecosystem and horizontal learning, where:

- ✔ Organisations exchange experiences and strengthen one another.
- ✔ IM plays a facilitating role.
- ✔ Feedback from both partners and rights holders informs ongoing decisions and adjustments.

In this way, accountability becomes bidirectional, grounded in trust, respect and coherence.

Its significance is particularly evident given that IM's main source of funding for its Global Programme comes from public funds, specifically the Civil Society Fund of the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA). This requires a deliberate balance between partner autonomy, institutional responsibility assumed by IM, and strong internal systems for monitoring, auditing and compliance.



This balance is reflected in concrete mechanisms:

- ✓ Partner organisations can use their own reporting formats, reducing administrative burden.
- ✓ IM ensures financial standards through key information and internal control processes.
- ✓ Audits are understood as spaces for dialogue and organisational strengthening, not solely as control mechanisms.
- ✓ Tools such as Progress Tracker generate qualitative and quantitative evidence based on feedback from rights holders.

In contexts such as Guatemala, Ukraine and Palestine, this approach has enabled partner organisations to adapt rapidly in response to political changes or crises, without relying on constant adjustments to externally imposed budget frameworks.

BETTER FUNDING LENS:

IM demonstrates that trust and accountability are not opposing approaches, but mutually reinforcing ones. Its model shows that it is possible to maintain high standards of transparency, meet public funding requirements, and at the same time sustain relationships based on trust, learning and autonomy. Rather than transferring donor requirements onto partner organisations, IM assumes institutional responsibility for compliance, protecting partners' space for autonomy to operate and decide.



Capacity strengthening and collective learning

IM Interventions

IM Interventions are a strategic framework used to strengthen collective action within the partner ecosystem, beyond direct funding.

Through this framework, IM organises and facilitates joint initiatives such as context analysis, advocacy, knowledge exchange and capacity strengthening, with the aim of increasing collective impact and responding more effectively to complex political and social contexts.

The annual IM Interventions fund is itself flexible and is implemented differently across countries, as it is closely linked to the needs and interests of each partner ecosystem.

For example, in Guatemala, IM Interventions are structured around three complementary areas:

- ✓ Understanding and influencing context and policy.
- ✓ Knowledge exchange and capacity development.
- ✓ Compliance and responsible resource management, promoting transparency, sustainability and innovation.

This approach provides a clear roadmap to coordinate and catalyse efforts between IM and its partners, reinforcing more equitable and rights-based cooperation.



Initiatives that transform accountability

DonorWatch

This initiative reconfigures traditional accountability dynamics by enabling:

- ✔ Organisations to evaluate donors.
- ✔ Building more equitable relationships.
- ✔ Stronger bidirectional transparency.

DonorWatch is grounded in the recognition that, within the current system, power and the ability to define funding rules are heavily concentrated among donors, while local organisations operate under conditions that limit their autonomy, flexibility and responsiveness to the needs of rights holders.

It works to shift this dynamic by creating a participatory index in which civil society organisations anonymously evaluate their donors. The results are compiled into public reports that identify strengths, gaps and areas for improvement in donor behaviour, creating a basis for advocacy and informed dialogue.

The initiative is implemented through leading local organisations in each country, ensuring a contextualised and politically grounded approach. It is currently being developed across five countries: Guatemala, Moldova, Ukraine, Malawi and Palestine, with shared global milestones and methodological flexibility for national adaptation.



Final reflections

The case of IM shows that feminist, anti-racist and decolonial principles can be translated into concrete funding practices.

Its model demonstrates that:

- ✓ The redistribution of power can be operationalised.
- ✓ Flexibility can coexist with high standards of accountability.
- ✓ Funding can serve as a tool to strengthen ecosystems, not just projects.

However, this approach has required internal changes in organisational structures, institutional language, evaluation methods and organisational culture.

It requires maintaining coherence between values and practice, while creating space for ongoing reflection and learning.

The experience documented here shows that a form of funding that does not impose barriers, but instead promotes fair, equitable and context-relevant practices, is not only possible, but continues to deliver meaningful social change.



If we truly aim to foster social change that addresses deep inequalities, it's essential that we reflect on our own actions and begin revising practices that, even unintentionally, may hinder the progress we want to achieve.

To foster lasting change, it's essential to shift from risk-averse, compliance-heavy models to methods that centre trust and allow for long-term, flexible, and movement-driven strategies. Sustainable progress takes time and can't be confined to one project. Embracing practices that may appear daring requires collective trust, patience, and commitment to continuous self-reflection and learning – a journey that is demanding but rewarding. This approach isn't an extra task or passing trend; rather, it forms the foundation of funding that aligns with values of fairness, equality, and decolonisation.

We invite funders to join this journey: to listen, to simplify and remove bureaucratic burdens where possible, to be transparent about constraints, and to co-create accountability that strengthens – rather than controls – those leading change.

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IM Guatemala Representative



To learn more about *IM Swedish Development Partner* visit:

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