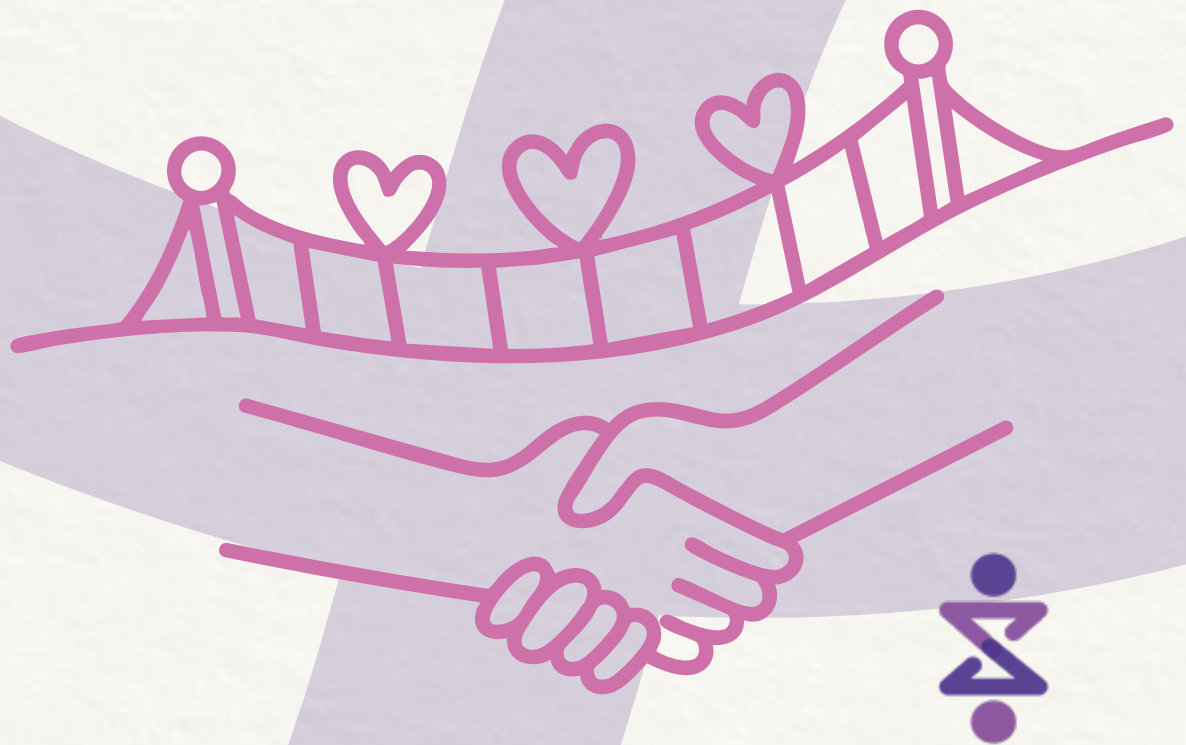


Better Funding Case Study

WECO: **Building Bridges** **Between Donors and** **Grassroots Organizations**





Introductory Note

This case study was developed in a Q&A format with the Women's Empowerment Coalition (WECO) to share reflections on their journey, model, and evolving practice as an intermediary funder.

We are sharing this case study to make these learnings more **accessible and useful** for funders and practitioners interested in:

- ✓ Building trusting relationships with community-led organizations.
- ✓ Reducing unnecessary bureaucracy for partners.
- ✓ Ensuring that grants are flexible and support identified local priorities.



Background to the Women's Empowerment Coalition (WECO)

WECO partners with grassroots organizations working to advance opportunities for women and girls around the world.

We support *locally-led initiatives* focused on areas such as:

- ✓ Girls' education
- ✓ Women's economic empowerment
- ✓ Gender equity
- ✓ Community resilience

We recognize that our partners are the people living the daily realities of their communities. They are the local leaders doing the work because they identified a critical need and were driven to take action, often doing so with limited resources. These leaders have deep knowledge of what challenges their communities face, necessary community trust, and understand the best pathways to solutions. Our role in this ecosystem is to **provide flexible funding, capacity-building, and connections to resources** that support community leaders in strengthening their programs and expanding their impact.



How do you identify and vet your grantee partners?

Our partnerships develop through relationships, referrals, and connections within grassroots development communities. We prioritize organizations that are small and deeply rooted in their communities, led by people who have a strong understanding of the local challenges and opportunities. These organizations are often well-established and have been operating successfully for several years, but many lack access to funding that could help them grow their impact.

Our vetting process is relationship-based and ***focuses on trust, transparency, strong local leadership, and alignment with our values.*** We mostly want to make sure the organizations we partner with have the capacity to partner on a project, and could benefit from our support. We also prioritize partners whose work focuses on girls' education, women's economic empowerment, and gender equity, as we believe (know!) these are among the most effective investments for creating lasting change that benefit entire communities.

What prompted you to focus so strongly on supporting grassroots initiatives?

In our experience, the most meaningful and sustainable change comes from the people with intimate knowledge of the challenges themselves. These are grassroots leaders who know what their communities need because they live those experiences every day. Rather than designing programs for, or prescribing solutions to communities we seek to support, we believe our role in the development ecosystem is to help the people already leading the work do what they do best in the way they know how to do it.

Ultimately, we wanted to challenge the traditional development approach where outside organizations define solutions and communities are viewed primarily as recipients. Instead, we believe ***communities should be and already are the key drivers of their own solutions, with funders and partners acting as supporters and collaborators*** rather than decision-makers.



How do you build trusting relationships with your partners, especially given the distance?

Trust starts with mutual respect and recognizing the power dynamics that often exist in international development. We approach each new partnership with curiosity. *We ask questions, listen carefully, and take time to consider what community priorities are before discussing how we might be able to support them.* When we're exploring a potential partnership, we also provide a small contribution to compensate leaders for the time they spend meeting with us, recognizing that our conversations sometimes take a few hours or even a day away from their work. If we believe their time and expertise have value (which we do), then we should compensate them for it, as too often leaders are unable to pay themselves adequately to do the work they are so dedicated to doing.

Once a partnership begins, we focus on **clear communication**—which doesn't necessarily mean constant communication. We know it can take time to build shared understanding, and sometimes following up several times or adjusting timelines is just part of the process. Grassroots organizations are often balancing limited resources while responding to rapidly changing community needs. We've also learned that Western ideas of productivity, professionalism, and project management don't always translate across cultures, particularly in rural communities. Rather than expecting partners to adapt to our way of working, we try to find a balance between accountability and flexibility. When we can, we simplify processes to reduce unnecessary reporting or administrative tasks, and focus on what is truly needed to ensure good stewardship and progress toward shared goals. *Our goal is to remain flexible and responsive,* to build relationships where partners feel supported rather than managed and can focus their energy on their programs.



How do you connect your donors and volunteers to the process of community development?

We believe meaningful engagement starts with understanding our role as outsiders working with communities to solve mutual goals. Rather than positioning donors and volunteers as problem solvers who come to fix or offer solutions, we overview our approach through an orientation (for volunteers), and invite them to ask us questions throughout an abroad experience. In whatever ways we can, we invite our funding partners into the learning process, which centers on listening and letting communities lead. Ideally, our trips help guide volunteers in moving beyond traditional notions of charity to understand more about sustainable local development.

We also acknowledge that *cultural exchange and mutual learning is absolutely part of our project trips.* Many volunteers leave with a deeper understanding of global issues, cultural perspectives, and the strengths that already exist within communities. Likewise, we invite donors to learn how their support contributes to long-term, community-led change rather than short-term interventions through research and thought pieces mostly on our blog and in our newsletters.



Have your practices and approach changed at all over the years? If so, how and why?

In some ways yes, in some ways no. Our approach remains consistent. We prioritize grassroots initiatives, understand the myriad benefits of supporting women, and know *there's no 'one way' to solve a problem.* It's a new path each time, and the difference is we have grown more comfortable holding nuance and living in the gray areas of the work so that we can navigate complexity without feeling lost or rushing into a decision.

We have grown more confident in articulating the value of what we do as an organization, and more resilient in our resolve to bridge the understanding gap in international development in as many donor communities as we can. We have also come to realize *the importance of relationship-building both ways on the bridge, with our funding partners as well.* Again, not prioritizing that over the work itself, but trying to find meaningful ways to invite people in and learn healthier ways to engage with communities they seek to support.



Have you faced any challenges in your approach?

Absolutely. One of our biggest challenges is balancing the desire to support the many incredible initiatives we encounter with the reality of our own capacity as a small organization. We see so much need and know there are resources available to address it, but too often those resources become bottlenecked or difficult for grassroots organizations to access. That can be frustrating and disheartening.

Another ongoing challenge is balancing donor expectations with the realities of community development. Donors understandably want to see metrics, measurable outcomes, and short-term results. While we understand the importance of that, we also know lasting community change is often complex, takes time, and is rarely linear. Projects may be delayed, priorities may shift, and emergencies may arise. *Those realities don't diminish the value of the work; they're part of the process.* We are intentional with how we communicate impact to honor the complexity of grassroots development while still providing transparency and accountability, even if it isn't as sexy as having big numbers or flashy metrics.

If you had one learning you'd like to share with other funders, what would it be?

I strongly believe intermediary organizations like WECO play an important role in the evolution of international development practices. It can be difficult for donors and larger funding organizations to identify and build trusted relationships with grassroots leaders doing exceptional work. Intermediary or bridge organizations help connect resources with the locally led initiatives that have the ability to create lasting change. *It may just be the connective tissue we need between funders and grassroots organizations,* helping resources flow more effectively to the people and communities where they make the biggest difference.



BETTER FUNDING LENS ON THIS APPROACH:

In their role as an intermediary funder, WECO serves to educate donors on the realities of community-led development while helping channel flexible, trust-based funding to grassroots organizations. Their approach reflects key Better Funding principles by prioritizing local leadership, reducing unnecessary administrative burdens, building relationships based on trust and mutual respect, compensating partners for their time, and recognizing that meaningful change is shaped by communities rather than external actors. WECO also highlights the important role intermediaries can play in bridging the gap between donors' expectations and the complex, long-term nature of locally led change.

By taking this approach to their funding, WECO provides valuable resources for community-led change, ensuring that their grants support locally-identified priorities and lead to sustainable change.

Is there anything else you would like to share?

I just want to emphasize again *the power of working in authentic collaboration with communities on priorities they themselves identify*. And of patience and pacing. Scaling is all well and good, but it must be rooted in grounded approaches that will last and relevant solutions that will stick.

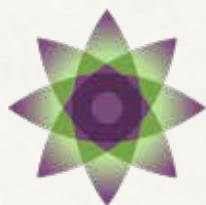


You can learn more about
WECO's inspiring work here:

<https://wecoalition.org/>



*With thanks to **Jenny Clark at WECO**
for sharing her insights and experiences
for this case study.*



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