Better Funding Practice

# Funding the Conditions for Collaboration and Collective Action

BETTER FUNDING

# Better Funding Practices:

## Funding the Conditions for *Collaboration and Collective Action*

Better Funding believes that lasting social change rarely happens in isolation. Community-based organisations hold deep knowledge, experience and expertise, but they also operate within wider ecosystems. Creating opportunities to connect, learn from one another, build relationships and act together can strengthen individual organisations while contributing to more connected and resilient movements.

Across philanthropy, there is growing recognition of the value of collaboration and collective action. Funders encourage organisations to build partnerships, participate in networks, engage communities and work collectively toward shared goals. But *collaboration does not simply happen because organisations are brought together or invited to work in partnership.* It takes time to build relationships, coordinate with others, navigate different perspectives, establish trust and learn together. These activities may be less visible than direct programme delivery, but they are often what make programmes, organisations and movements stronger and more sustainable.

If funders value collaboration, ***their funding practices need to recognise the real cost of making it possible.*** Funders can also play an important role beyond providing financial resources. They can create opportunities for connection, open doors to networks, support peer learning, and resource the ideas and collaborations that emerge.

The goal should not be to manufacture collaboration, but to *create the conditions in which meaningful relationships, shared learning and collective action can grow.*

# ***Why support*** **learning networks, collaboration and collective action?**

Learning networks can create spaces where organisations connect with peers who understand their realities, exchange knowledge and experiences, explore common challenges and build relationships beyond individual funding partnerships.

Over time, these relationships can create opportunities for collaboration and collective action. However, connection, collaboration and collective action are not the same thing, nor does one necessarily need to lead to another.

A learning network might primarily provide a space for peer exchange and support. Organisations might choose to collaborate around a particular opportunity or challenge. In other cases, relationships may develop into collective action around shared priorities. What matters is that participants themselves determine what is useful and what they want those relationships to become.

When funders invest in the conditions for meaningful connection and collaboration, it can contribute to:

- ***Stronger organisations and leaders,*** by expanding access to peer knowledge, support, relationships and opportunities.
- ***Shared learning and innovation,*** enabling organisations to exchange strategies, experiences and solutions grounded in their own contexts.
- ***Stronger relationships and collaboration,*** building trust and familiarity that can make it easier to work together when opportunities or challenges arise.
- ***Greater collective power,*** enabling organisations to identify common priorities, mobilise resources, influence systems and advocate for change together.

Importantly, these benefits cannot always be predicted or measured through immediate outputs. ***Relationships take time to develop, and their value may become visible months or even years later.***

Rather than asking only what a network or convening has produced, funders should also pay attention to what it has made possible.

# How can funders support learning networks, collaboration and collective action?

## 01. Recognise the real cost of collaboration

Collaboration requires time and resources. Building relationships, coordinating activities, facilitating meetings, communicating across organisations, navigating different perspectives and learning together all require capacity. Yet these costs are frequently overlooked in funding budgets or expected to happen alongside programme delivery.

*If collaboration is important to your strategy, fund it accordingly.* Provide resources for coordination, facilitation, convenings, communications, staff time and the other infrastructure required to sustain collective work.

## 02. Fund meaningful participation

Creating an opportunity is not the same as making it accessible. Participation in networks, gatherings, conferences and learning opportunities can involve travel, accommodation, visas, registration fees, accessibility requirements and significant staff time. These costs can prevent smaller community-based organisations from participating in spaces where important decisions are being made.

Consider what participants actually need in order to take part fully and *resource participation rather than simply extending an invitation.*

# 03. Use your influence to open doors

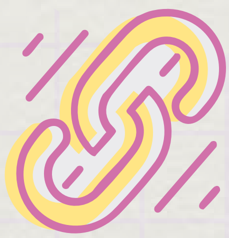
Funders have resources beyond money. Their relationships, networks, visibility and access can help connect community-based organisations with opportunities they might otherwise struggle to reach.

Introduce partners to other funders and organisations. Support their participation in conferences and sector gatherings. Invite them into philanthropic conversations and decision-making spaces. Share opportunities, amplify their work and make connections when they may be useful. ***Opening doors can help redistribute access and influence across the funding ecosystem.***

# 04. Do not force collaboration

Collaboration is valuable when it responds to genuine relationships, shared interests or common priorities. Requiring organisations to collaborate simply because they work in the same geography or thematic area can create additional work without necessarily creating additional value. Similarly, participation in a funder-supported network should not become an implicit requirement of receiving funding.

Invite rather than mandate. ***Create worthwhile opportunities for connection and allow organisations to decide whether, when and how they want to participate or collaborate.***



## 05. Let participants shape the space

A network is more likely to remain relevant when the people participating in it have meaningful influence over its purpose, agenda and evolution.

Ask participants what they want to learn, discuss and explore. Allow priorities to change as circumstances and relationships evolve. Experiment with different formats and regularly ask whether the space continues to add value.

Funders can provide resources and support without determining every activity. ***The people participating in a network should help define what the network is for.***

## 06. Recognise the expertise already in the room

Peer learning is not secondary to external expertise. Community-based organisations hold considerable knowledge about their contexts and about areas such as community organising, leadership, fundraising, governance, communications, advocacy, crisis response and organisational sustainability.

Create opportunities for participants to share their own experiences, strategies and skills with one another. Invite participants to lead sessions, facilitate conversations and identify areas where they would benefit from additional external expertise.

External facilitators, trainers and specialists can add significant value, particularly when responding to needs participants themselves have identified. But *learning networks should recognise participants as knowledge holders, not simply recipients of capacity building.*

# 07. Invest intentionally in trust and relationships

Putting people in the same room does not automatically create trust. Trust develops through time, consistency, respect, confidentiality and shared experiences. It also requires recognising the power dynamics that participants bring into a space, including those created by funding relationships themselves.

Be intentional about creating conditions where people can build genuine relationships. Establish shared expectations around confidentiality and participation. Create opportunities for informal connection alongside structured activities, and recognise that some conversations may benefit from taking place ***without funders in the room.***

A space is not safe simply because it is described as such. ***Trust and safety must be built, practised and continually upheld by everyone involved.***

# 08. Make space for wellbeing and collective care

Not every gathering needs to maximise outputs. Leaders working toward social change frequently carry significant responsibilities and pressures. Networks can provide opportunities not only for professional learning, but also for reflection, solidarity, rest and mutual support.

Consider incorporating wellbeing and facilitated reflection into gatherings, while leaving enough unstructured time for informal connection. Downtime is not simply a break between sessions; conversations over meals or between activities can be just as valuable as the formal programme, creating space for relationships and ideas to develop organically.

***When people have space to breathe, connect and feel supported, stronger relationships and possibilities for collaboration can emerge.***

## 09. Fund what emerges

One of the most valuable outcomes of bringing organisations together may be something the funder could not have predicted.

Relationships can lead to joint initiatives, peer exchanges, campaigns, shared research, collective advocacy, collaborative fundraising, emergency responses or entirely new ideas. Where possible, maintain flexibility to resource opportunities that emerge from the network rather than limiting funding to activities established at the outset.

If funders invest in creating the conditions for collaboration, they should also be prepared to ***support the ideas and collective action that participants themselves decide to pursue.***

## 10. Build toward participant ownership

Funders may initially provide the resources, coordination or convening power needed to establish a network. Over time, however, leadership should increasingly be shared with the people who participate in it.

Create opportunities for participants to initiate meetings, shape agendas, facilitate sessions, make decisions and determine priorities. *But ownership should mean greater agency, not greater obligation.* Be mindful of participants' existing workloads and avoid turning participation into additional administrative or coordination responsibilities they may feel unable to decline.

This does not necessarily mean that funders should eventually withdraw financial support. ***Financial sustainability and ownership are not the same thing.*** The goal is for the network to belong to its members, even when funders continue to resource it.

Participant leadership also requires resources. Coordination, facilitation and governance remain work when they move from a funder to network members. *Transferring ownership should not mean transferring unfunded labour.*

# What Does This Look Like in Practice?

## GoPhilanthropic Foundation and RED MAIIS

GoPhilanthropic Foundation was a US-based foundation that supported small, grassroots organisations working across Latin America, Asia and Africa. Alongside providing grants to individual organisations, the foundation recognised that its partners held considerable knowledge and expertise that could be shared with one another.

GoPhilanthropic had already seen the value of bringing partners together through regional learning exchanges with organisations in India, Nepal and Southeast Asia. Building on this experience, in 2020 the foundation began exploring the creation of a regional learning network among partner organisations in Mesoamerica, creating a space where organisations could share knowledge, reflect on common challenges and explore solutions grounded in their own realities.

When the network launched virtually during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021, the first activities focused on wellbeing for non-profit leaders, creating opportunities for pause, connection and collective nourishment during an extraordinarily difficult period. As relationships developed, so did the network.

In 2022, members gathered in person for the first time. Alongside opportunities for connection, organisations participated in experiential workshops on fundraising and sustainability. The gathering helped deepen relationships between members, and collaborations began to emerge organically.

GoPhilanthropic continued to invest in the network through convenings, facilitation, learning opportunities and access to wider sector spaces. In 2023, several members participated in the #ShiftThePower Summit in Bogotá, where they explored power dynamics within philanthropy and reflected together on how funding systems might change.

Later gatherings continued to respond to priorities identified by participants. Members explored organisational sustainability and resource mobilisation while increasingly discussing the sustainability, identity and future of the network itself. Learning came not only from external facilitators but from within the group, as members exchanged strategies on fundraising, communications, governance and navigating common challenges.

As relationships deepened, the network became a source of mutual support and solidarity between members. Members supported one another through burnout and uncertainty, shared opportunities and developed collaborations across organisations. As the network evolved, GoPhilanthropic's role gradually shifted from creating and resourcing the space toward supporting greater ownership by participants.

When GoPhilanthropic prepared to close in 2025, members chose to continue the network independently. Recognising that greater ownership should not mean an immediate withdrawal of resources, the foundation provided a final grant to support the network's operations while members developed their own financial sustainability plan.

Today, what began as a funder-led learning initiative has evolved into an autonomous, peer-driven collective. Members are developing their own identity, governance and direction while continuing to explore sustainability, local leadership, power and what it means to practise philanthropy on their own terms.

The experience demonstrates what can become possible when a funder ***invests in relationships without trying to determine where those relationships must lead.***

By resourcing connection, wellbeing, learning and participation; opening doors to wider opportunities; responding to what emerged; and supporting the transition toward participant leadership, GoPhilanthropic helped create conditions from which collaboration and collective ownership could grow.

# Final Thoughts

Funders cannot manufacture collaboration or collective action, but they can help create the conditions in which they become possible. This requires recognising that relationships, coordination, learning and participation are not peripheral to social change. They require real time, labour and resources, and should be funded accordingly.

It also requires resisting the temptation to predetermine what collaboration should produce. ***The role of a funder is not necessarily to build the network, set its agenda or decide what its members should accomplish together.***

Instead, funders can resource connection, open doors, support learning, make space for wellbeing, respond to what emerges and allow leadership to shift over time.

When organisations have meaningful opportunities to connect as peers, relationships can develop that extend far beyond an individual grant or funding cycle. Those relationships can strengthen organisations, sustain leaders, generate new collaborations and, sometimes, become the foundation for collective action and greater collective power.

# We would love to hear from you:

As a funder, how are you resourcing the time, relationships and infrastructure that meaningful collaboration requires?

As a community-based organisation, what helps a network or collaborative space feel genuinely useful and worth your time?

What have you learned about creating the conditions for collaboration without forcing it?

Share your experiences: what has worked, and what has not?

***Let's learn together*** **and strengthen the field.**