FUNDING CIVIL SOCIETY FREEDOM

Models, Stories and Strategies for Making Flexible Funding Work



ADD International

CIVICUS

GF CF

GlobalGiving

PEACE DIRECT

the sharetrust™

TABLE OF CONTENTS

03

Introduction: It's time to fund flexibly - and it's already being done 03

Overview 03

05

Definitions, models, and key features 05

What is flexible funding? 05

Models of flexible funding 07

Defining the impacts of funding flexibly 08

1: Dedicating resources to enable and ensure flexibility produces stronger impact 08

2: Accountability is central to flexible funding, and not trusting grantee partners is the true risk 08

3: Accompaniment support elevates collaboration over competition, leading to greater sustainability 09

4:Unfair funding legacies can be mitigated by fostering equal and mutually respectful relationships between grantee partners and funders 11

12

Four flexible funding models for shifting power and resources 12

DIRECT CHAMPIONS 13

CONNECTORS 23

EXPERIMENTERS 30

CONVENER-ADVOCATES 36

40

Conclusions and recommendations 40

Summary of key features across flexible funding models 40

Considerations before committing to a flexible funding programme 43

Specific recommendations for Global North bilateral donors and philanthropic funders 44

45

Acknowledgements 45

INTRODUCTION

It's time to fund flexibly – and it's already being done

Overview

This research project began at the end of 2024, at the cusp of a new era of unprecedented cuts to foreign aid, or Official Development Assistance (ODA). The swift and severe nature of the cuts, from the United States, the United Kingdom, and many more Global North bilateral donors, reaffirmed[1] that unilateral, top-down funding sources cannot serve the cause of decolonising international cooperation,[2] or of building a new, equitable system.

An alternative already exists: funding that is provided flexibly, enabling people and communities to tackle their own needs and challenges. This is why we chose to call this report 'Funding Civil Society Freedom.' Right now, civil society organisations (CSOs) in the Majority World/Global South do not have the freedom to design, develop and implement the work that they believe is necessary for their communities. Over 25 years ago, Nobel Prizewinning economist Amartya Sen published 'Development as Freedom' in which he penned one of the most memorable and important definitions of the term 'development'. He wrote that 'Development is the freedom to live the life that one has reason to value.' For Sen, development wasn't about the things that were delivered, the food, the medical equipment, the books or the infrastructure. It was the freedom to choose, to participate, to chart your own path, to play an active role in the decisions that affect you. **To have choices.** For Sen, poverty was the absence of those freedoms. Civil society in the Majority World/ Global South are denied choices by the funding that is offered to them. Funding should be liberating. It should give civil society the freedom and capability to choose how to tackle the problems that they have decided are most important to them. Flexible funding at its best provides that freedom.

There is no comprehensive dataset that captures how much current funding is being flexibly disbursed. But, as one partial proxy, research from the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) conducted in 2024 found that around 16% of all philanthropic (not governmental) donations in development were designated as unrestricted rather than as project/earmarked support. The research also found that flexible funding is most likely to be provided to Global North nongovernmental organisations (NGOs), and least likely to be given to NGOs based in Africa, East Asia and South Asia.[3]

Our research on flexible funding models does not start from a 'neutral' standpoint. **We believe that flexible funding is both vital and preferable to existing mainstream, rigid forms of funding**. And it is **a crucial part of shifting both power and resources from North to South.** The case for flexibility *(the why)* has been made.[4] As noted by the Funding for Real Change initiative:

> **"Flexible, multiyear grants, anchored in trust, are not only the right way to build grantee partnerships but also the smart way for grantmakers to create more impact, advance equity, and strengthen grantee organizations for the long run, as strong evaluations show."[5]**

[1] Connective Impact. (July 2024). From Crisis to Collaboration: Reimagining Global Development Beyond Traditional Aid: Breakthrough Brief. Available at: https://www.connectiveimpact.com/blog/from-crisis-to-collaboration-reimagining-global-development-beyond-traditional-aid

[2] Peace Direct, Adeso, the Alliance for Peacebuilding and Women of Color Advancing Peace and Security. (2021). Time to Decolonise Aid. Available at: https://www.peacedirect.org/time-to-decolonise-aid/

[3] OECD Centre on Philanthropy (2024). No Strings Attached? Making Sense of Flexible Financing in Philanthropy. OECD Development Centre. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/no-strings-attached-making-sense-of-flexible-financing-in-philanthropy_0264b47f-en.html

[4] Peace Direct and Kantowitz, R. (2015). Radical Flexibility – Strategic Funding for the Age of Local Activism. [online] Peaceinsight.org. Available at: https://www.peaceinsight.org/reports/peacefund/ [Accessed: 12 August 2025].

[5] Funding for Real Change. (2021). Accelerating Equitable Grantmaking: Seizing the Moment to Norm Multiyear, Flexible Funding. Available at: Accelerating Equitable Grantmaking: Seizing the Moment to Norm Multiyear, Flexible Funding. Also see https://www.fundingforrealchange.com/multi-year-flexible-funding.

Our research thus focuses primarily on how organisations implement flexibility in practice. Luckily, examples of funding that operate far more freely and flexibly exist, and indeed are plentiful. This report has therefore sought to:

- Identify, understand and categorise different models of flexible funding to provide inspiration for other organisations wishing to either adopt, support or promote these models – without directly comparing or evaluating models.

- Address the challenges faced by funders who are hesitant to adopt flexible models by highlighting best practices and lessons learned.



Methodology

This report intends to demystify flexible funding and offer options for multiple audiences in the broader funding and international development sectors who are interested in funding more flexibly. It is not intended to be a scientific evaluation of funding models, but rather a presentation of the four models of flexible funding we have identified. Following a targeted literature review and analysis of documents and secondary sources provided by a wide range of organisations, we held semi-structured conversations with 19 funders and networks of varying funding profiles. We spoke to participants in both senior leadership and programme-level roles. These conversations were held online, and encouraged participants to share with us their understanding and approach to flexible funding, as well as the stories of how they got there. Additionally, we held a focus group discussion with available grantee partners[6] to capture their first-hand experiences with funding. Through these conversations, we were able to surface the steps that a) led to the introduction of the flexible funding model, b) drove specific experiences for grantee partners, and c) enabled further sustained flexibility.

Limitations

While our conversations with funders offered rich insights, we recognise the limitations of our sample. First, there are countless flexible funding mechanisms globally. This report does not attempt to provide a comprehensive mapping but uses the case studies presented to broaden engagement on flexible funding. Second, only grantee partners can truly attest to the difference that flexible funding makes to their work. While we spoke to some grantee partners, further research should centre this.

---

[6] The ongoing shifts in the sector have meant that grantee partners and funders' capacity was stretched to the limit, affecting the number of grantees available to attend the focus group discussions.

DEFINITIONS, MODELS, AND KEY FEATURES

What *is* flexible funding?

The term 'flexible funding' has become a buzzword – one which has almost as many meanings as there are types of funders. As described by Gugo Siqueira of Rede Comuá in Brazil:

> **"Flexible funding is polysemic – something that will vary by context – but that is a good thing. We do not want to restrict the definition of flexible funding, to ensure that all possibilities are guaranteed."**

In that vein, many different terms arose throughout the research:



It is important to emphasise that core or unrestricted funding remains the gold standard for funding. It is a call that has been repeated for many years from civil society organisations in almost every country. Studies from the Bridgespan Group, the Center for Effective Philanthropy and the Trust Based Philanthropy Project all highlight the abundance of evidence that demonstrates the impact of unrestricted funding, and so we encourage readers to access these and other reports. For most donors, unrestricted or core funding is still something that they are unwilling or unable to contemplate, and this report does not aim to explore why. What we argue in this report is that even if core or unrestricted funding is not possible within a funder's existing strategy or scope, there remains a wealth of options to consider which fall under the 'flexible funding' category.

It is difficult to settle on a universal definition of flexible funding, a dynamic concept that has different meanings for actors across the funding ecosystem. But flexibility is more often than not defined by several key principles:[7, 8]

- **Long-term commitment** in the form of multiyear funding that allows for organisational or movement strengthening.
- **Ability to adapt** funding allocations, approaches and timelines according to the changing context.
- **Responsiveness and speed**, allowing for any changes to be made quickly to meet needs as they arise.
- **Unrestricted where possible**, allowing recipients of funding to determine their own priorities.
- **Accompanied by non-financial support**, supporting funding recipients in their areas of greatest need.

For the pioneers, who have always funded this way, being a flexible funder is much more than what they *do* – it is **part of who they are**, and an **ongoing practice**. Flexible funding is therefore an **identity** and a **philosophy** as much as a funding modality, one which is often based on a worldview and mindset of trust, openness, equity and decoloniality. As Chhavi Doonga, Director of Strategy and Programs at Prospera, told us:

> **"Flexible funding is a political commitment rather than something technical. This is why feminist funds fund flexibly – it is in th eir make up, it is why they exist."**

This was reinforced by Gabriela Toledo, Co-Director of Fondo Semillas in Mexico (which has existed for 35 years):

> **"Feminist funding is practical as well as ideological."**

For many, flexible funding is therefore deeply **political**. It comes from a specific way of viewing power and the world. As described by Maaz Salih Idres, the Peace Direct lead for its Local Action Fund:

> **"Flexibility means being fully committed. A lot of power is concentrated in the funding space, including invisible power. But power without care and love and trust is reckless and vacuous. Without that depth and philosophy, what are you doing?"**

As we outlined in the introduction, flexible funding is far more than a technical exercise in adaptation. It should be liberating.

It is also important to emphasise that flexible funding is **not static, nor is it one-size-fits-all**. It is a concept that lives and breathes and adjusts to changing contexts over time. Adopting a rigid definition of what counts as 'flexible' can therefore ultimately constrain the work of funders, particularly those who are at **the beginning of a flexible funding journey**. The funders we interviewed as part of this project clearly stated that **flexible funding is something that an organisation continually aspires to** – it requires nurturing and iteration.

A simple rule of thumb for assessing whether flexible funding is actually flexible is that it should be defined as such by the grantee, not the donor. If a grantee feels that they have the freedom to do the work that they want to do, in the way that they want to do it, then the funding is probably as flexible as it needs to be, even if it is not unrestricted funding.

[7] See Peace Direct's report recommendations on funding: Peace Direct. (2023). Transforming Partnerships in International Cooperation. p7. Available at: https://www.peacedirect.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Peace-Direct-Transforming-Partnerships-Report-English.pdf [Accessed: 29 October 2025].

[8] Peace Direct and Kantowitz, R. (2015). Radical Flexibility – Strategic Funding for the Age of Local Activism. [online] Peaceinsight.org. Available at: https://www.peaceinsight.org/reports/peacefund/ [Accessed: 12 August 2025].

Ultimately, what unites flexible funding organisations and individual champions is the belief that there is nothing controversial about flexible funding when you understand its multiple benefits.[9]

Models of flexible funding

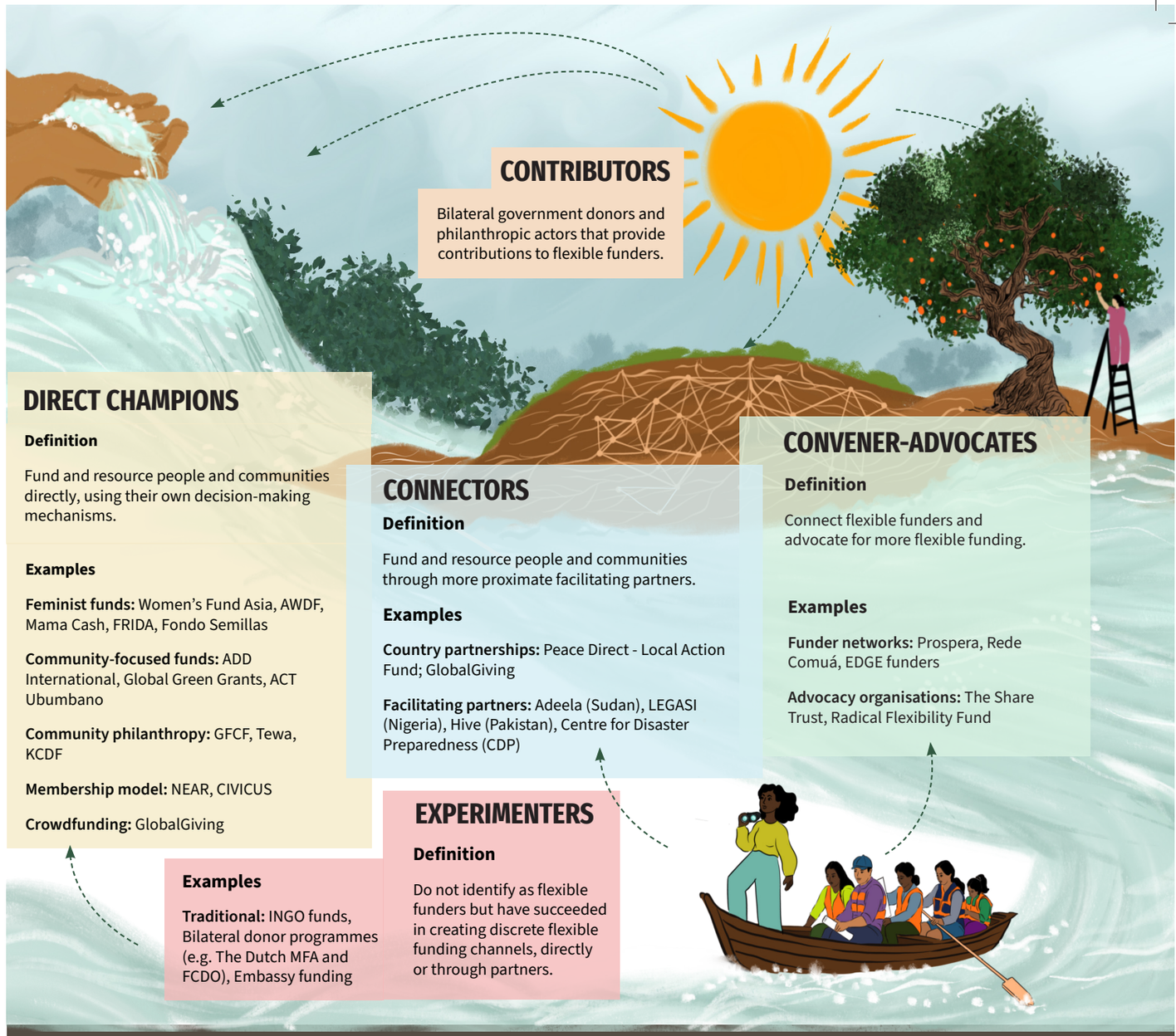
Through desk research and in-depth conversations with a wide range of funders, we have identified the following flexible funding models: **Direct Champions, Connectors, Experimenters,** and **Convener-Advocates**. For each model, this report outlines the following: i) a snapshot description, ii) sub-categories, iii) origins and reasons for existing, iv) structural features of the model, v) internal effects of funding flexibly, vi) relationships and funding dependences, and vii) challenges and benefits.

Many of the **Direct Champions** we spoke to have funded flexibly for decades, and therefore form the bulk of the sub-categories and examples included in this analysis.

Connectors are more nascent, in a context where efforts to reform the international development funding system are gathering momentum.

Experimenters who experiment with the Direct Champion, Connector and Convener-Advocate models – are also less common, given the nature of the traditional funding ecosystem.

[9] Griffiths, D., Guizzardi, S., and Craciun, A. (2025) There's Nothing Controversial About Core Funding. Alliance Magazine. Available at: https://www.alliancemagazine.org/analysis/theres-nothing-controversial-about-core-funding/



It is important to note that funders and organisations rarely fit neatly into a single model. Many move between models or operate across multiple models depending on the context, internal shifts or external pressures.

All existing and prospective funders have a role to play when it comes to funding flexibly. The detailed description of each model below highlights the structural features, benefits and challenges of each model to aid funders in deciding which approaches would best suit their capabilities, constraints and ultimate vision.

Defining the impacts of funding flexibly

While each flexible funding model has unique characteristics, our research uncovered **several common features that appear across all models.** These are also the core reasons why organisations should be inspired to fund flexibly.

1: Dedicating resources to enable and ensure flexibility produces stronger impact

- **Ensuring accessibility in all of its forms requires additional resources.** How funders engage with accessibility from the perspective of their grantee partners is fundamental to their identity and values – and it produces a more inclusive impact. Many Direct Champions in particular seek to raise greater awareness of this. For example, ADD International launched the *Fairer Funding Campaign* to advocate for more and better funding for disability justice.[10] As shared by Women's Fund Asia: inclusion in funding means intentionally building in and resourcing language justice, accessibility, and engagement with partners as a key part of funding partnerships.



Examples include:

- allocating additional funding for travel and hotel options to ensure these are accessible for people with disabilities, and
- budgeting for translation costs (which can be very high) to help overcome language barriers.

- **A willingness to deal with practical challenges is crucial.** A sign of true commitment to flexible funding is being able to handle practical challenges as they arise. Flexible funders are able to mobilise and get creative to overcome these challenges.

  For instance, several funders highlighted the common challenge of transferring money in contexts where banks are heavily scrutinised or where sanctions exist. Creative solutions from flexible funders include:

  - asking sister funds to transfer money if they have better access,
  - working with fiscal sponsors, or
  - taking the risk of using more informal channels – this increases the chance of funds reaching areas where they will have the most impact.

  In fragile and conflict settings, flexibility and adaptability also means moving money fast enough to respond to the uncertainty of conflict and humanitarian crises.

- **Prioritising care and wellbeing makes a difference.** Funding that does not respect the wellbeing of staff, advisors, partners and grantees is not aligned with the values of flexibility. Conversely, funding that does prioritise care and wellbeing is more likely to be impactful and sustainable. Women's and feminist funds in particular emphasised the importance of care. As described by the African Women's Development Fund (AWDF):

> **"Changing systems takes time! It can be overwhelming. How can we care for ourselves and also individuals? We ensure that we model that as AWDF, but also provide spaces for partners, especially now in the crisis this year, to talk, to care and to heal."**

2: Accountability is central to flexible funding, and *not* trusting grantee partners is the true risk

- **A false tension between accountability and flexibility.** Flexible funders see accountability as fundamental to their work – and it looks different to mainstream funding.

[10] ADD International. (2025). Fairer Funding for Organisations of Persons with Disabilities. Available at: https://add.org.uk/fairer-funding/

For Prospera, it is vital to "address the tension that is created between flexible funding and accountability – that is not the story."

> "Funding can be flexible and we still want to see proof of what people are doing. But it can be told in their own language and perspectives rather than through donor agendas. Women and feminist funds have been doing that work." Chhavi Doonga, Prospera

- **True accountability is to the communities that are intended to benefit.** Flexible funders must account to the communities that they ultimately hope to serve. Some funders (particularly in community philanthropy) deploy accountability as the basis for asking their grantee partners to produce a financial report and, at times, receipts. But it is the focus of the reporting that matters, as described by Global Fund for Community Foundations (GFCF):

> **"[traditional] funders say: what did my money buy? Not, *what are communities doing for themselves?* There is no curiosity about how to be additive and respectful of what is already there."**

And as described by Greg Hilditch from Global Greengrants Fund,



> **"this is about *accountability to movements*, not to donors, whilst also *working to improve the quality of the evidence about our grantee impact.*"**

- **Risk must be recast.** All of the flexible funders we spoke to as part of this research agreed on one central point: narratives and conversations that centre risk in flexible funding are missing the point. In other sectors, such as the investment world, risk is seen as good and necessary. As put by ACT Ubumbano,

> **"development practice needs a shake up – we can't keep doing the same things and expecting different results. A far more important risk conversation is how to take risks on new ideas and innovations."**

Mama Cash echoed this sentiment:

> **"The focus on risk is wrong-headed, especially when the groups that we fund are taking risks. Fear of risk is not the real concern – it is that donors are afraid of giving up control."**

3: Accompaniment support elevates collaboration over competition, leading to greater sustainability

- **Funding dynamics shift from transactional to relational.** As funding relationships involve monetary resources, they can easily become transactional, especially in cases where the funder is removed from the immediate context. ACT Ubumbano phrases this best, noting that: "money is needed to support the struggle, but if it's the starting point, it becomes problematic."

> "Keep money in the frame, by all means, but we are increasingly finding that a mechanism that enables transformation and emancipation is most important. **The word we use is 'accompaniment' – funding is an enabler.** That features strongly in our expression and descriptions of solidarity."

Accompaniment allows funders to move beyond transactional grantmaking to fund relationships based on mutual accountability and solidarity.[11] For flexible funding to meaningfully transform the sector, both grantee partners and funders need to centre the human element. This, as many shared, requires funders to actively put themselves in the shoes of grantees, anticipating the barriers they face such as language barriers, accessibility for people living with disabilities, and the needs of marginalised groups.

- **Accompaniment helps grantee partners navigate the largely untransformed funding landscape.** While flexible funding is undoubtedly making a difference, the broader funding landscape remains rigid, risk averse, and compliance heavy. Accompaniment helps to bridge this gap by offering practical guidance and institutional support, helping grantees to navigate the often intimidating structures and processes of traditional philanthropy that haven't yet caught up to flexible funding. As CIVICUS relates, this kind of accompaniment "would set our grantees up for receiving further funding and being able to manage these in terms of donor expectations." AWDF shares a similar sentiment, noting that accompaniment is also aimed at long-term sustainability:

> **"Community-based organisations (CBOs) and NGOs should not just rely on us for the lifetime of their organisations. We're also thinking about sustainability, about broadening the work and the impact that they make. They need resources from elsewhere so we provide non-financial accompaniment; this includes capacity strengthening; this can include financial management, digital safety and security, leadership and governance, communication and documenting their work."**

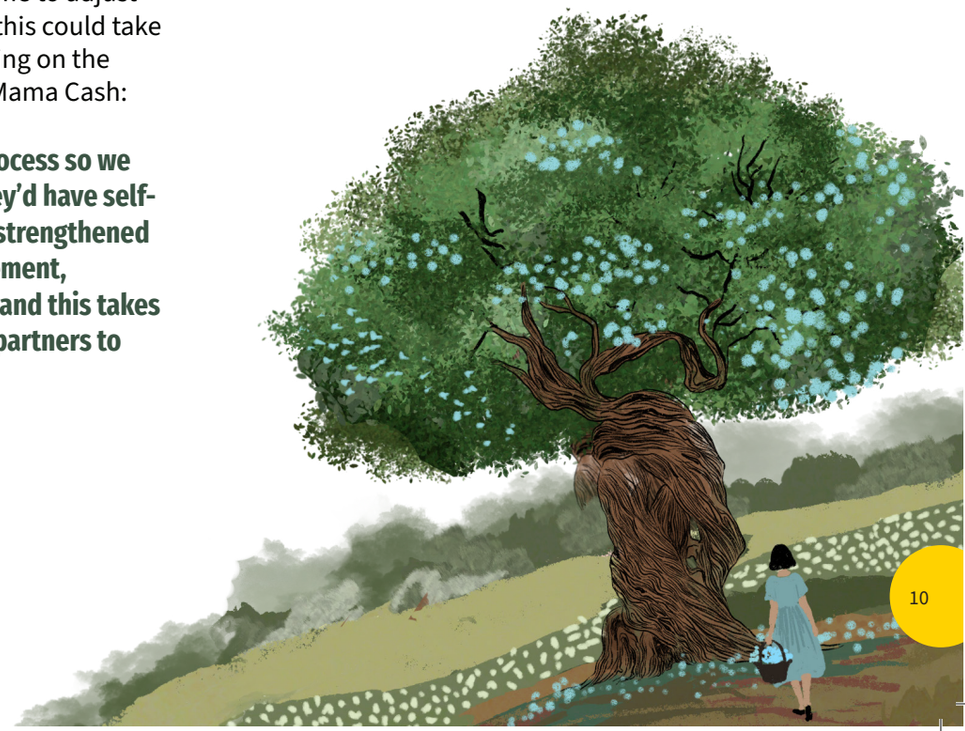
- **Accompaniment can be a tool for practical support.** As grantee partners and funders have grown used to working within and around rigid structures, accompaniment enables both to ease into alternative forms of partnership. Often, grantee partners require some time to adjust to alternative ways of working – this could take weeks, months or years, depending on the context. As rightly explained by Mama Cash:

> **"We have an accompaniment process so we know what their needs are – they'd have self-identified the things they need strengthened in governance, financial management, collective care for their groups, and this takes vulnerability and openness for partners to speak about."**

Through continued dialogue, check-ins and support, funders are better able to anticipate grantee partner needs and recognise their strengths, which may not always show up in programmatic reporting. As part of their accompaniment, FRIDA shares that they support partners to tell the best story about their work:

> **"We know they did a lot through email or call updates but it's not always reflected in the report[...]. So we talk with our team and agree on ways to support them [with writing reports]."**

Accompaniment makes grantmaking more responsive and reduces the burden on both sides.



[11] Peace Direct (2023). Transforming Partnerships in International Cooperation A practical resource for civil society, donors, INGOs and intermediaries. [online] Peace Direct. Available at: https://www.peacedirect.org/content/uploads/2023/10/Peace-Direct-Transforming-Partnerships-Report-English.pdf [Accessed: 08 August 2025].

4: Unfair funding legacies can be mitigated by fostering equal and mutually respectful relationships between grantee partners and funders

- **Traditional funding has left legacies of fear.** Even as the discourse and practice of flexible funding grows, the bulk of funding remains concentrated in top-down processes and structures.[12] The effects of mainstream funding remain deeply entrenched in both grantee partner and funder practices. This legacy has, over time, bred fear, leading to what Hive in Pakistan describe as:

> **"an exaggerated sense of success, where problems are hidden rather than addressed."**

NEAR shared a similar observation, noting that:

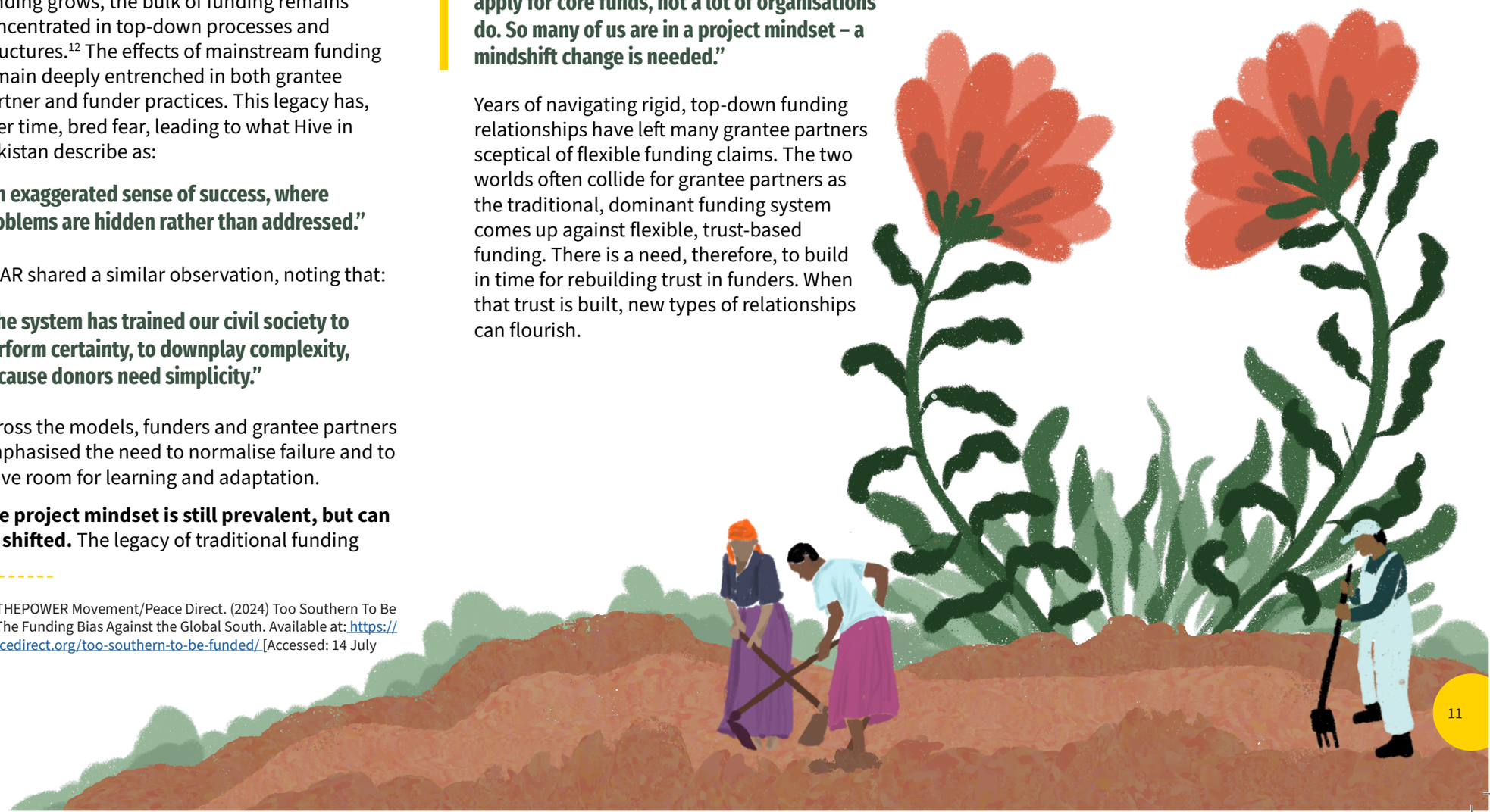
> **"The system has trained our civil society to perform certainty, to downplay complexity, because donors need simplicity."**

Across the models, funders and grantee partners emphasised the need to normalise failure and to leave room for learning and adaptation.

- **The project mindset is still prevalent, but can be shifted.** The legacy of traditional funding means grantee partners have often had to adapt to its structures and processes. It takes time and mutual 'unlearning' to shift this as funders embrace flexible funding. CIVICUS, for instance, shared that even though their Solidarity Fund is fully flexible, and:

> **"Even though it is explicit that [members] can apply for core funds, not a lot of organisations do. So many of us are in a project mindset – a mindshift change is needed."**

Years of navigating rigid, top-down funding relationships have left many grantee partners sceptical of flexible funding claims. The two worlds often collide for grantee partners as the traditional, dominant funding system comes up against flexible, trust-based funding. There is a need, therefore, to build in time for rebuilding trust in funders. When that trust is built, new types of relationships can flourish.



[12] #SHIFTTHEPOWER Movement/Peace Direct. (2024) Too Southern To Be Funded: The Funding Bias Against the Global South. Available at: https://www.peacedirect.org/too-southern-to-be-funded/ [Accessed: 14 July 2025].

FOUR FLEXIBLE FUNDING MODELS FOR SHIFTING POWER AND RESOURCES




DIRECT CHAMPIONS

DIRECT CHAMPIONS

Snapshot description

Organisations designed to provide flexible funding, alongside other forms of non-financial accompaniment support, directly to individuals, organisations, communities, networks or movements that do 'the work'.

Sub-categories

The specific ways in which Direct Champions operate differ according to their overall ethos, specific sector, or focus areas. There are additional funds and funders in the Global Majority who are core to the flexible funding ecosystem and fit within this category. While we have cited some of these, we believe they warrant dedicated research to be properly understood and recognised. We have identified the following (non-exhaustive) sub-categories:

Intersectional feminist funds

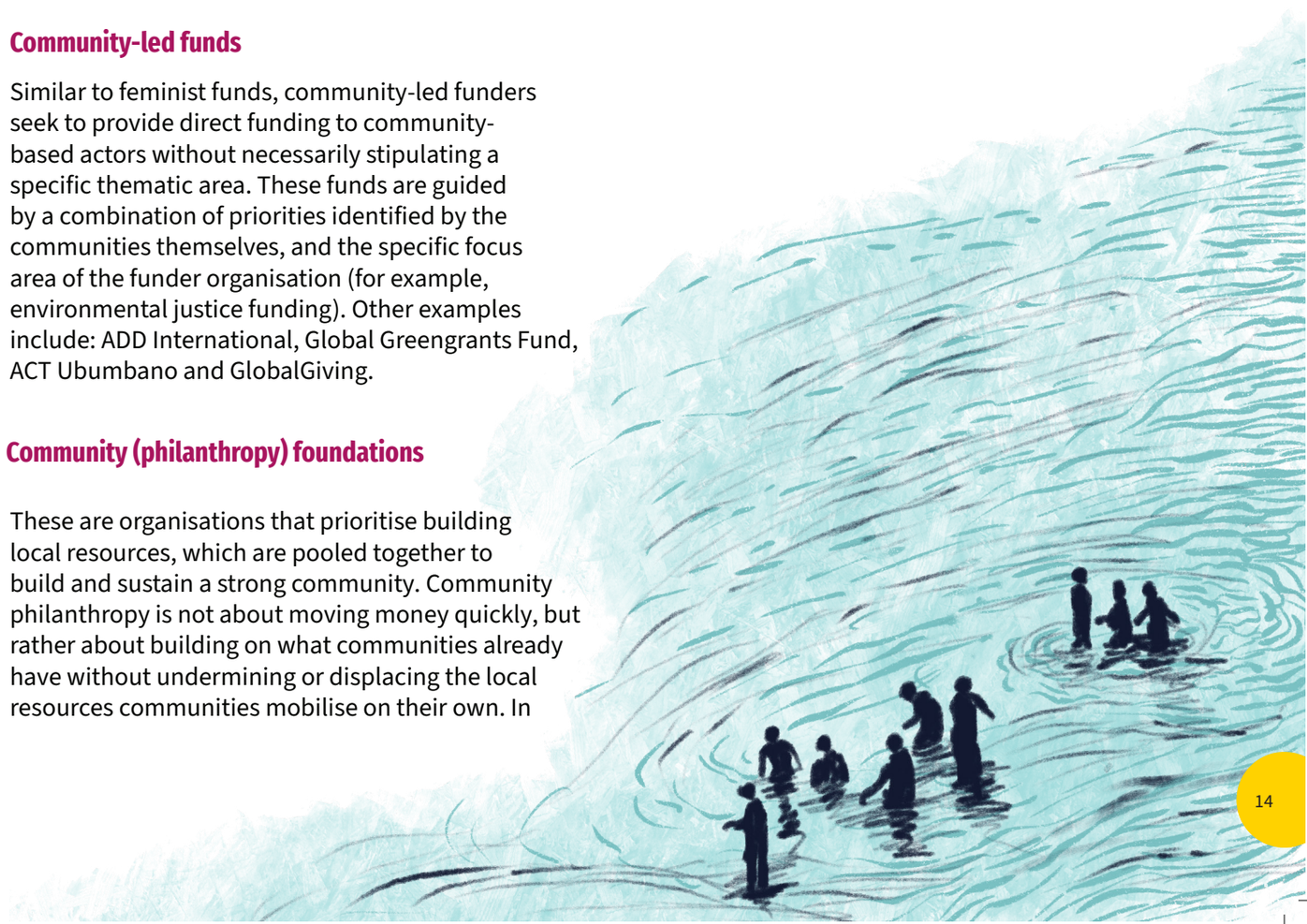
Broadly speaking, these are organisations that fund feminist individuals, groups and movements to promote gender equality alongside broader social justice causes such as racial justice, disability justice, and more. They also prioritise direct funding to women, girls, as well as for trans, intersex and non-binary people, taking levels of exclusion and other characteristics into account in an intersectional way. Examples include: the African Women's Development Fund (AWDF), Women's Fund Asia, Mama Cash and FRIDA Young Feminist Fund.

Community-led funds

Similar to feminist funds, community-led funders seek to provide direct funding to community-based actors without necessarily stipulating a specific thematic area. These funds are guided by a combination of priorities identified by the communities themselves, and the specific focus area of the funder organisation (for example, environmental justice funding). Other examples include: ADD International, Global Greengrants Fund, ACT Ubumbano and GlobalGiving.

Community (philanthropy) foundations

These are organisations that prioritise building local resources, which are pooled together to build and sustain a strong community. Community philanthropy is not about moving money quickly, but rather about building on what communities already have without undermining or displacing the local resources communities mobilise on their own. In this context, flexible funding is about "creating the conditions in which resources are part of organising power and building voice and collective action. It's not the amount of money, but the quality of it," as described by Jenny Hodgson from the GFCF.



Crowdfunding

This entails raising funds from the public via an online platform (as one-off or regular gifts), which are then disbursed, often flexibly, directly to individuals or organisations. For GlobalGiving, one such platform, the aim is to create connections between where resources are and where funding is needed. GlobalGiving provides a platform with upfront vetting for community partners to enable global fundraising and giving. These partners determine community priorities, raise and receive funds, and share transparently how they have chosen to spend the funds.

Membership and network funds

While not all membership organisations fund their network, some, such as CIVICUS and NEAR, create funding instruments that are available to their members. This creates a horizontal, member-to-member approach, often enabling a greater level of flexibility than usual. This is because the *source* of the funding is largely pooled from membership fees rather than a traditional funder. The Innovative Peace Fund, run by the International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN), provides fully flexible funding by soliciting proposals from women-led organisations involved in addressing peace and security issues, drawing on its existing partnerships in the Women's Alliance for Security Leadership.

Northern philanthropic funders

Some Global North/Minority-based philanthropies that provide multiyear flexible funding[13] also fund Global South/Majority organisations directly. The Global Fund for Children provides small organisations with flexible, long-term support, and actively campaigns for more flexible funding across the philanthropic sector.[14] The Ford Foundation's Building Institutions and Networks (BUILD) initiative provided grantees with five years of general operating support and targeted organisational strengthening support through multiyear, unrestricted funding.[15] The Oak Foundation has noted its commitment to continue and increase direct support to initiatives that are led by local communities and constituency-led organisations.[16]

Origins and reason for existing

For Direct Champions, funding flexibly is firmly part of their organisational 'DNA'. Although they are ultimately funders, we were told many times over that **building relationships** is as important as, and often the starting point of, a funding journey. In **community philanthropy**, for instance, as noted by GFCF:

> **"Grants are sometimes used to form the basis of a relationship, but relationships do not start or end based on a grant contract."**

For many Direct Champions, **feminist funds** in particular, a focus on the broader **ecosystem** to uplift movements and activist groups is also essential. The African Women's Development Fund (AWDF), a feminist fund that has existed for 22 years, **prioritises core support** – which they ultimately see as political – to support movement building through three main types of partners: CBOs or NGOs, non-traditional or informal/unregistered actors, and individuals.

Structural features of Direct Champions

1. Funding application processes

Type of process

Most Direct Champions have **specific windows** during which applicants can apply for funding, but some accept proposals **year-round.** Most have **open calls**, while others reach out to applicants directly (some alternate, depending on resource availability). Global Greengrants Fund, for instance, receives recommendations from its global network of Advisors, who often directly contact applicants to encourage them to apply, and provide support in completing the initial application form. Whether or not a funder does open calls is directly related to its capacity, as this stage must be handled responsibly to avoid creating **unrealistic expectations.** One of the ways GFCF approaches this is by only inviting organisations to make a full application when they intend to make the grant. As GFCF noted:

[13] See list of funders provided by Funding For Real Change: https://www.fundingforrealchange.com/join-this-movement
[14] Global Fund for Children. (February 2024). Why Flexible Funding is at the Center of GFC's Approach to Philanthropy. Available at: https://globalfund-forchildren.org/story/why-flexible-funding-is-at-the-center-of-gfcs-approach-to-philanthropy/
[15] See Ford Foundation Building institutions and networks website for more detail, including an in-depth evaluation report: https://www.fordfoundation.org/work/our-grants/building-institutions-and-networks/
[16] Oak Foundation. (October 2024). Cover Letter: What Opportunities Exist for Philanthropic Partnership in the Global South?. Available at: https://oakfnd.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Cover-letter-what-opportunities-exist-for-philanthropic-partnership-in-the-Global-South.pdf

> **"We are conscious of using power carefully to not waste people's time. A big challenge is that people want to deliver projects – GFCF cares about them, not projects."**

Funding criteria

Each funder has a set of bespoke criteria that relate to their specific vision and purpose. Almost all Direct Champions, however, require that groups be **self-led** by the constituencies they intend to benefit. The application process is therefore used to assess whether this is the case.

Proposal requirements

Some form of **proposal** (**often written** but not always) is usually required, often accompanied by **conversations** to understand the applicant's vision and ideas. But the requirements are generally light-touch (sometimes only a page of narrative and a high-level budget), and all funders emphasise that the proposed plan can change. There is **some debate** over whether formal proposals should be required at all if funding is to be considered truly flexible. Overall, however, Direct Champions tend to emphasise the importance of high-level, adaptable proposals when it comes to being **accountable** to communities – that is, setting out intended plans allows both funders and grantee partners to broadly track whether intended benefits are actually being delivered.

Crowdfunding

In the case of crowdfunding platforms such as GlobalGiving, organisations apply for creating a fundraising profile, which entails upfront vetting, often at no cost to the organisation. A successful application enables fundraising for two years.

Streamlining applications for urgent funding

Applications for **crisis or emergency funding** often look different. For example, Women's Fund Asia has provided limited **top-up grants** to existing partners or partners funded in the last few years to respond to urgent situations – even accepting **voice notes** in lieu of written proposals to expedite the process. In Mexico, Fondo Semillas makes emergency funding available, and applications are reviewed by a committee of five people with an obligation to respond to requests within 24 hours. This is a recognition that emergencies often put the lives of feminists at stake. Within a membership context, NEAR also prioritises speed through using a **light-touch verification process.** All grantees are NEAR members and have therefore been pre-vetted, greatly enabling speed.

Renewal applications

Given the emphasis of many Direct Champions on long-term relationship and movement building, some also provide the opportunity for existing partners to apply for **funding renewals.** FRIDA, for instance, invites new grantee partners to join for a nine month to one year process (depending on the number of partners being welcomed). After this, partners can apply for renewal funding of up to four years.

Non-application collaborative approaches

In some forms of participatory grantmaking, there are **no standard** applications from individual grantees. Instead, funders may opt to convene a cohort of organisations working in a particular area, offer them an unrestricted pot of funds, and support them to decide together how to allocate the funds over a given timeframe. For instance, ADD International is piloting this form of collaboration with cohorts of organisations of persons with disabilities (OPDs). In one case, groups within the cohort decided to spend the available money across six grants: three for single organisations, and three for groups of OPDs that have decided to work together.

Common insight

Regardless of the specifics, Direct Champions view the application as the **start of an engagement process** through which they get to know both new and existing actors. CIVICUS has conducted specific research on **barriers to participation,** which led to a review of its funding application forms and the introduction of an eligibility quiz to guide potential applicants. FRIDA has also worked on making its application form more accessible, and the application process itself is the start of its support. For instance, FRIDA is able to arrange sessions with applicants to explain what to do step-by-step. This knowledge can also be used by young feminists in future applications for other funders that may not be as flexible.

2. How funding decisions are made

Direct Champions make funding decisions in a variety of ways, but all are underpinned by the principle that decisions must be taken, to the greatest extent possible, by the people most proximate to issues and causes.

Advisory or oversight groups

Because Direct Champions tend to be either global or national funders, they rely heavily on bodies that are in some way representative of the people and communities they intend to benefit for grantmaking decisions. Since its founding, FRIDA has relied on a **Global Advisory Committee**, made up of young feminist activists from all over the world, to screen applications and review final results. They also support in setting the organisation's strategic direction. Mama Cash operates a **Community Committee** (known as the COM COM) with 11 members, which makes decisions about its largest fund. The members must be known by and connected to movements, and accountable to them. Global Greengrants Fund's **Advisory Network** includes 220 advisors across 30 advisory boards and partner funds. Its claim to be a participatory grantmaker is directly related to the fact that its advisors (who receive a small stipend) represent the movements they are part of. Some have been with Global Greengrants for 30 years.

Membership representatives

For membership organisations, decision-making bodies ultimately reflect the **composition of the members** themselves. At CIVICUS, for instance, the **Membership Advisory Group** makes the final assessment on its Solidarity Fund applications. For its Change Fund, the NEAR secretariat convenes an **Oversight Body** with representatives from members across Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, and the Middle East. This body meets regularly to review emergencies in different contexts, and ultimately decide whether a threshold has been reached to issue funds and open a call for proposals for members. The Oversight Body has a set of principles the Change Fund itself is based on: equity, simplified applications, rapid and adaptive disbursement.

Anita Kattakhuzy from NEAR explains how this creates an effective **peer-to-peer** dynamic, where funding shifts from being a transaction to a tool of shared responsibility and care:

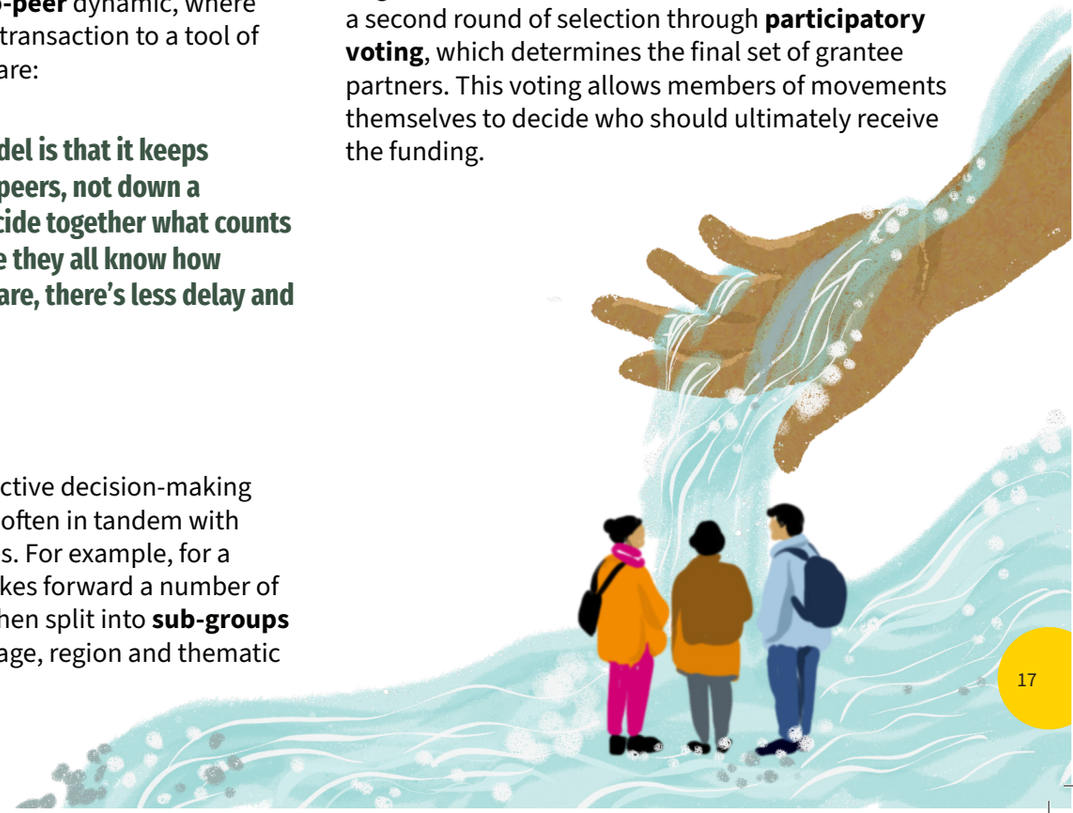
> **"The benefit of this model is that it keeps funding moving across peers, not down a hierarchy. Members decide together what counts as success, and because they all know how urgent these moments are, there's less delay and less second guessing."**

Voting-based approaches

Some funders build in collective decision-making through **voting processes**, often in tandem with advisory or oversight bodies. For example, for a given funding call, FRIDA takes forward a number of eligible groups, which are then split into **sub-groups for voting** (based on language, region and thematic area). They are asked to **vote for fellow applicants**, and the top-listed groups are then reviewed by the Advisory Committee and FRIDA staff, followed by a due diligence process. As Oleksandra Brashovetska from FRIDA noted, this is a:

> **"Way of empowering young feminists, supporting solidarity for fellow activists, and expanding understanding of what is happening in the given region."**

Fondo Semillas assembles a committee of experts across different parts of the country to review applications. Experts are selected based on what the most pressing issues of the moment are (for instance, migration, sexual violence, and more). There is then a second round of selection through **participatory voting**, which determines the final set of grantee partners. This voting allows members of movements themselves to decide who should ultimately receive the funding.



Direct engagement with applicants

ACT Ubumbano, a network of Southern African and European organisations, runs the Solidarity Support Facility and invites applicants to apply directly online. In the first year of the Facility, ACT received 50 applications, reviewed by a team of three people, and was able to speak to each applicant directly. However, as the number of applicants has increased, this direct engagement with each applicant has not been possible. A question that smaller funders grapple with is how to maintain this level of engagement as funding amounts and numbers of applicants increase, while staff numbers remain similar.

Common insight

Direct Champions carefully consider how to balance decision-making responsibilities between external experts (often unremunerated) and members of their own teams. For Mama Cash, for instance, a COM of only 11 people cannot make sole decisions on hundreds of grants a year. When it comes to renewal grants for existing grantee partners, therefore, Mama Cash's Programme Officers make the final decisions, as they hold close relationships with partners. For Mama Cash, "balancing practicality with participation" is key, as described by Chantelle de Nobrega; in 2025, they received 2,000 applications and could only award 1% with funding.

3. Overview of types of grants

As a general rule, Direct Champions tend to give **small to medium-scale grants** (anything from $2,000 to $100,000) over multiple years, given that support is targeted at community and activist groups, as well as grassroots movements and unregistered actors, who are not seeking funds that are **larger than they can absorb.** As the overall funding landscape shifts, some funders are applying the same principles to more formally registered organisations, leading to larger sums. For example, the Emerging Climate Champions Award is a global open call that provides flexible, multiyear gifts of $1 million each to youth-led organisations advancing climate solutions.[17]

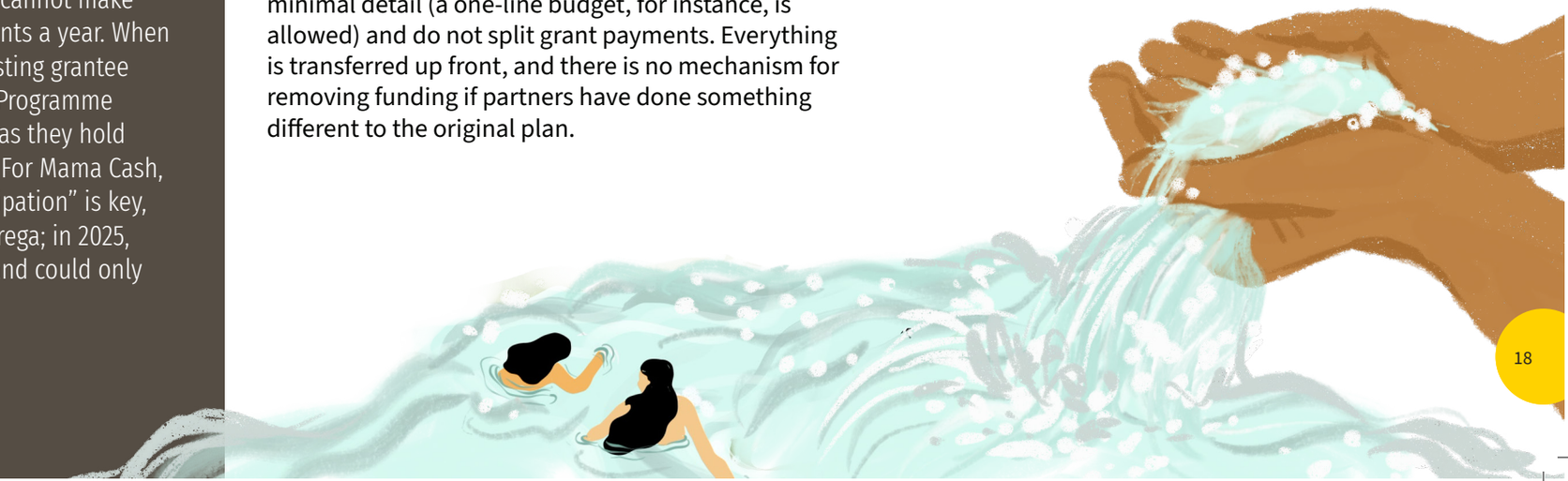
Feminist funds commit to **long-term funding**. For instance, support from Mama Cash to grantee partners can last up to 10 years. Another common feature is that Direct Champions grants tend to prioritise **core funding** in their frameworks, rather than project-based funding, which can be used to support any type of internal or external activity. Even funders that stipulate more project-based funding, such as Global Greengrants Fund, only request minimal detail (a one-line budget, for instance, is allowed) and do not split grant payments. Everything is transferred up front, and there is no mechanism for removing funding if partners have done something different to the original plan.

Direct Champions are also often a **grantee partner's first funder.** This requires careful thinking on the part of the funder, to avoid **creating harmful dependence** or **starker power dynamics.** As explained by GFCF:

> **"We are always careful to see the funding as a proportion of an organisation's budget – the grants are deliberately a small percentage, as a strategy to check power and make sure it never goes to places where the relationship moves from being personal and warm to being unhealthy, because your funding is the majority of their funds."**

To protect their partners' freedom and relative independence in funding, Direct Champions negotiate the terms of engagement with traditional funders upfront, often assuming the burden of risk on behalf of their partners.

[17] https://climate.leverforchange.org/submit



4. Grant management and reporting requirements

How grants are 'managed', including reporting requirements, are often what truly set Direct Champions apart from more 'traditional' funders. In general, management and reporting processes are designed to be as **minimal and flexible** as possible, with the aim of allowing grantee partners to sit in the driving seat at all times.

Trust-based approach

As FRIDA describes:

> **"The main idea we constantly reiterate is that grantee partners are the main experts, because they know their reality and challenges, and what they need money for."**

For ADD International in the disability justice space, Vanessa Herringshaw notes it is:

> **"Essential to use a rights- and justice-based approach, abiding by the principle of it is my right to decide what happens in my life."**

In a membership context, **peer-to-peer funding** also helps to **redefine who holds expertise**. NEAR:

> **"Believes its members hold lived experience in how to respond to crises. That experience is expertise, a resource and knowledge that is underacknowledged, and it should be sufficient for decision-making."**

Due diligence processes

Despite a common assumption that flexible funding does not include any form of **due diligence**, Direct Champions do include this step – but in a way that **reinforces trust and accountability**. Women's Fund Asia describes having a thorough due diligence process because accountability is important to constituencies – especially those that the organisation cannot directly fund – but the process is carried out quickly, while still ensuring all voices are heard. Mama Cash also has a relational approach to due diligence, by asking for endorsements from trusted contacts to verify that groups are doing the work they say they are. Most are contacts known to Mama Cash: advisors, peer funders, movement representatives, networks, and other grantee partners. Through due diligence, Direct Champions often absorb some of the vetting burden, especially when working with more stringent back donors, that is, funders Direct Champions themselves receive funding from. GlobalGiving shared that the design of the vetting process aims to gather only what is necessary, and it can seek to leverage publicly available information or take other steps to process information without overburdening the grantee.

Simplified reporting requirements

As described by Nana Zulu from AWDF, grantee partners want:

> **"core support and trust-based relationships – it is not the best use of their time to do long reports. Instead, doing participatory documentation and feminist MEL is key."**

Similarly for GFCF, reporting is not a conversation about money, but about sharing what matters most to the grantee partners in service of building a community and a movement. Reporting is also about **collective learning** to support community philanthropy: GFCF has 20 social capital indicators and asks partners to select three to describe where they think change has happened.

Crowdfunding and storytelling

When funds are distributed through a crowdfunding model, there is flexibility by virtue of having a large group of supporters. Reporting becomes about stories to share with supporters rather than formal reports for a single funder. The distinguishing factor for GlobalGiving, for instance, is that an organisation can receive $10 or $50,000, and the level of sharing ('reporting') is the same.

Internal effects of funding flexibly

Because Direct Champions base their work on a **philosophy of horizontality, trust and mutuality** with grantee partners, it is unsurprising that they also think carefully about their internal operations so as not to reproduce or reinforce unequal power dynamics inside the organisation. It is vital that this ethos transcends from staff members all the way to senior leadership and board members. Indeed, for many feminist funds in particular, staff members come from an activist background. In practice, FRIDA told us, this means they are:

> **"therefore not detached from the realities grantee partners face as everyone wears several hats: funder, partner, activist."**

ACT Ubumbano adopted an ethos of 'doing development differently' early on, especially because having power often takes away the capacity to be self-critical. As described by Ashley Green-Thompson, Director of ACT:

> **"What emerged was a commitment to solidarity that did not centre money but rather human agency and justice. NGOs, funders, and faith-based organisations are complicit if we replicate power imbalances in communities of people that we say we serve. If you are serious about transformation and change, if you are unable to critique your own positionality and practice, you will never be able to see the change you want to see."**

As part of this, ACT introduced a checking of bias in the grant decision-making process, acknowledging the background and therefore potential biases of its three team members.

Being aware of internal power dynamics is especially crucial for organisations who are either transitioning or re-transitioning to more flexible approaches. For Vanessa Herringshaw at ADD International, one of the key lessons has been to "open up the core design of each fund and hold it open as much as possible." So, at the start of each fund:

> **"Rather than the money holder or intermediary, it's the constituents who decide how grants need to be structured to make the most impact, how grantee identification and selection processes will run, etc."**

And as the transition progresses:

> **"Rather than rushing to a single codified model of grant-making, keep that openness so the core design can keep responding to learning; new funds are designed with each new group any new fund is meant to support."**

Clear internal communication on what it means to transition to a flexible or participatory grantmaking approach is also vital to sharing power. At ADD, it was made clear that the organisation was wholeheartedly committing to a new phase:

> **"We are not going to tweak, we are going to make really radical shifts."**

Relationships and funding dependencies

Like other models, Direct Champions receive funding from a plethora of sources including bilaterals, family funds, foundations, Global North NGOs and, increasingly, corporate actors. As such, **flexibility is often not a given**, but rather is negotiated at the point of design as the **quality of funding can vary** depending on the source. As the overarching goal for why they fund is predetermined – that is, movement building, solidarity, community building – Direct Champions tend to be **selective** in the types of funding they accept. Indeed, most of those interviewed shared instances where they had to **turn down funding** as it was not aligned to the broader agenda and priorities the fund was aiming at.[18] At the same time, because many funds, especially feminist funds, have the **backing of a wider ecosystem** from above and below, they can often negotiate the quality of funding they receive, and advocate to safeguard grantee partner interests.

Feminist and women's funds shared that their strategies for accessing quality funding include **allyship and cultivating trust-based relationships** at different levels in the funding ecosystem. This, they have shared, allows different actors to feed into a bigger agenda and for input to emerge from multiple sources. This unlocks quality resources, and shifts inequitable power dynamics. Reflecting on the development of the Leading from the South (LFS) Consortium (a partnership between African Women's Development Fund, Fondo de mujeres del sur, FIMI – The indigenous women's fund, and Women's Fund Asia), Women's Fund Asia shared that it took concerted advocacy from Global South based feminist organisations – including AWDF and Mama Cash, and individual champions within the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs – for LFS to be born (more details in the Experimenters section). In the words of Anisha Chugh from Women's Fund Asia:

> **"we need to recognise that we have many allies spread across the funding landscape (and we need to create more) and to strengthen our ecosystem and grow our community we need to be working closely with such allies and champions working in complex structures of philanthropy and aid."**

To activate this support, they have placed evidence at the centre of their approach, working with their allies to build their case and access funding together.

[18] Basi, S. (2024). 'Passive 'Donor-Pleaser' or 'Resource Activist'? The Role that Fundraisers can Play in Creating a Fairer Funding System. Alliance Magazine. Available at: https://www.alliancemagazine.org/blog/passive-donor-pleaser-or-resource-activist-the-role-that-fundraisers-can-play-in-creating-a-fairer-funding-system/

Challenges for Direct Champions

Though successful in setting the standard for flexible funding, Direct Champions are not bereft of challenges. Four stood out in this research.

1. First, **flexible funding is costly**. As the funding is value-based, be that it is aimed at systems change, or strengthening the ecosystems, meeting this goal demands meaningful engagement, which can be costly. Many of the funds we explored for this report have adopted a type of **participatory grantmaking** (PGM) in an effort to ensure meaningful inclusion and representation, reflective of the demography, context and issue[s] the fund is designed to address. On a superficial level, any version of participatory grantmaking demands that more people are included in the decision-making process,ensuring that participants' time and contributions are compensated accordingly. Target groups (whether youth, persons living with disabilities, indigenous groups or others) will often be severely **under-resourced and underrepresented and, as such, require additional resources to ensure accessibility**. Reflecting on the need for language justice and accessibility, Women's Fund Asia aptly shared that:

> **Translations are expensive, ensuring accessibility needs to be taken care of. For example, in early 2020 (right before COVID hit us) we facilitated a disability rights convening led by feminist disability rights convenors from the Asia region. This convening was a major learning curve for us as an organisation (and we are still learning). Not just content, but the entire logistics arrangement was a political process. For example, we needed sign language interpretation, and we realised from the expert advisory input that we will need a minimum of 4 people that will undertake different sign languages in multiple shifts as it's exhausting for them as they use their entire body to communicate and they have to alternate. We had taken this for granted[...] . Similarly, when we organise meetings with our partners in the region we have to book hotels that are 4-star and above for accessibility[...]. So you will budget in higher costs for hotel and accommodation and this is something that sometimes you have to negotiate with funders to justify these costs. That's why our budget has very clear lines on inclusion translation and accessibility. We now also have an understanding why applications from disability organisations would cost more. We need to value this when talking about flexibility and inclusion."**

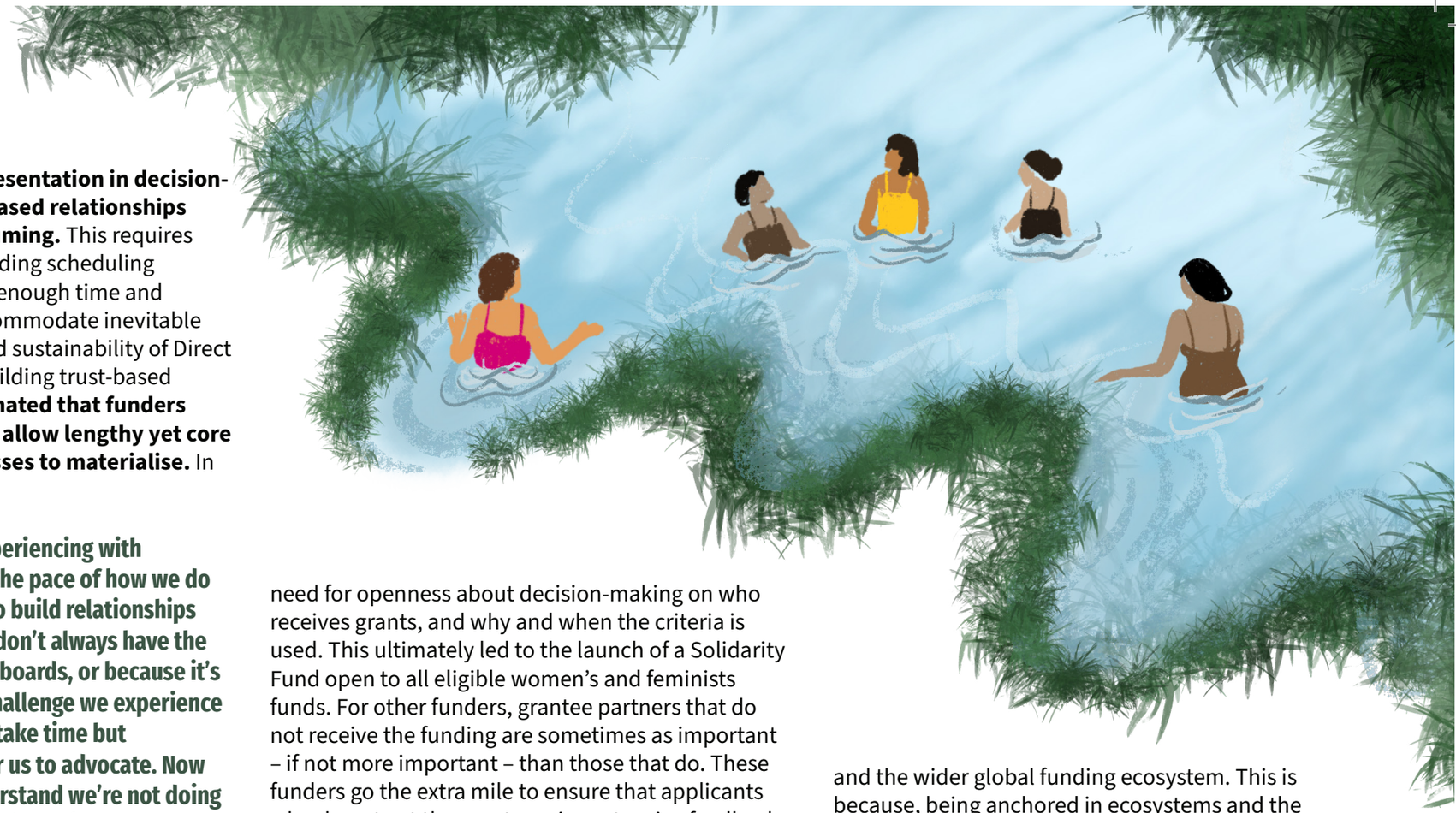
Although Direct Champions are sustained by network building, solidarity building, core funding, accompaniment and convening, these are the elements that most funders are most reluctant to fund.

However, when set against the high-impact potential of flexible funding to build ecosystems and cultivate meaningful partnerships, its perceived high cost is **easily outweighed** by the **long-term benefits** that even short-term flexible funding can spark.

2. Second, there remains a **marginal risk of reproducing elements of traditional funding that inadvertently introduce restrictions/inflexibility.** In part, the traditional sources of funding that Direct Champions depend on can often require them to sustain traditional funding structures. Although sometimes necessary, this can spill over into the wider practices of organisations and funds striving for flexibility. Reflecting on the difficulty of balancing the external expectations and internal agenda, one organisation shared that:

> **"Because of our internal processes, we still have to go through people who have less of a risk appetite than we might have for certain things. How do we decolonise ourselves too? Why do we need all these mechanisms? [...] When all these conversations are had internally, particularly if it's a Global North-based organisation funding into the Global South, people realise that they hold onto these structures but it is all artifice in a way and it is about control. Funders struggle to free themselves."**

In other words, the unavoidable reality of relying on traditional funding as the primary funding source can breed fear and stifle Direct Champions' capacity to innovate and stay flexible.



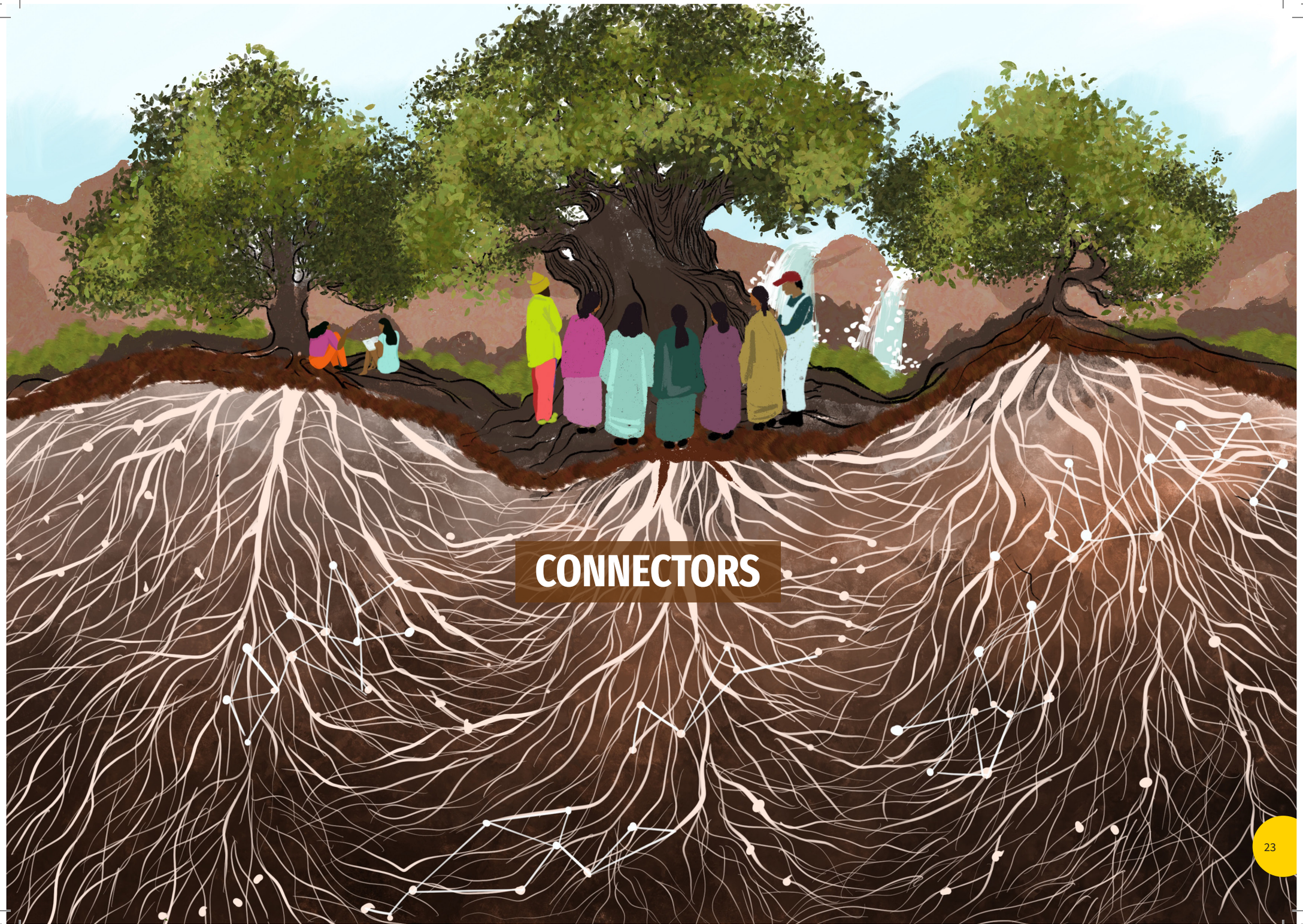
3. Third, **inclusivity and representation in decision-making and building trust-based relationships is important, but time consuming.** This requires setting systems in place, including scheduling grantmaking, and building in enough time and contingency measures to accommodate inevitable shifts. Equally, the success and sustainability of Direct Champions is anchored on building trust-based relationships. Yet, **many intimated that funders seldom have the patience to allow lengthy yet core relationship-building processes to materialise.** In this regard, CIVICUS shared:

> **"It's a challenge we're experiencing with [traditional donors] with the pace of how we do things, because in order to build relationships it takes time, and donors don't always have the patience because of their boards, or because it's taxpayers money. It is a challenge we experience because these processes take time but sometimes it's difficult for us to advocate. Now we have donors that understand we're not doing activity-based projects, we're trying to change a system and that takes time."**

4. Finally, given their flexibility and relatively extensive reach in the ecosystem**, Direct Champions often face more interest and demand than their available resources and capacity can accommodate.** On the one hand, this can bring about negative competition at the local level. On the other hand, it has also stood out as a key learning opportunity, in some instances resulting in approaches that neutralise such competition. For Mama Cash, this resulted in **generative conversations on transparency**; specifically, the need for openness about decision-making on who receives grants, and why and when the criteria is used. This ultimately led to the launch of a Solidarity Fund open to all eligible women's and feminists funds. For other funders, grantee partners that do not receive the funding are sometimes as important – if not more important – than those that do. These funders go the extra mile to ensure that applicants who do not get the grant receive extensive feedback and support on their ideas to safeguard and nurture emerging visions in the organisation while also strengthening the network.

Benefits of the model

Beyond the structural benefits of this model highlighted above, successful Direct Champions have the **potential to holistically strengthen organisations** in a way that centres local leadership, and **enables and supports local resource mobilisation**. They can also **strengthen links between local and immediate regional contexts** and the wider global funding ecosystem. This is because, being anchored in ecosystems and the community, Direct Champions have both the interconnectivity (networks) and the extensive reach to the hyperlocal (grassroots). By design, **Direct Champions invest in the bravery of grantee partners, staff, and boards, in making decisions on flexible funding** and negotiating flexibility at multiple levels. Recognising the relationship between their power as funders and their grantee partners' expert power, **Direct Champions have understood that funding is about control. When grantee partners have control, they can decide what is most important to their vision for their communities.**


CONNECTORS

CONNECTORS

Snapshot description

Organisations (Global North-based) that channel funding indirectly by partnering with other organisations who are more proximate to the communities they serve in the Global South, thereby strengthening local and national funding ecosystems. As opposed to traditional intermediary partners, such as Global North INGOs, Connectors act as a supportive conduit for funding, rather than as an implementer of activities on the ground.

Important note

There are many Global South organisations who also play this role but with distinct characteristics. This report focuses primarily on resource transfers from North to South. To learn more about Global South connectors, see Trust, Accountability, and Inclusion (TAI) collaborative's four models of Global South intermediaries,[19] and a scoping study conducted by a team of women across Latin America and Asia on understanding the re-granting ecosystem in the Global South.[20]

Sub-categories

Connectors work with partners most proximate to the issues, including regional hub partners and other types of in-country entities (herein collectively referred to as **facilitating partners**) that ensure the experiences of grantee partners remain visible, resourced and heard. With this in mind, the way Connectors approach flexible funding can differ.

Multi-country hub partnership

These organisations do not tend to identify primarily as funders – rather, they are NGOs (often Global North based) that create **mechanisms** through which they are able to channel flexible funding. These funders seek to **bridge gaps** between restrictive funding structures and more flexible approaches in order to support the development of funding ecosystems at the local and national level. Peace Direct's Local Action Fund (LAF) is an example of this. The LAF supports locally led peacebuilding initiatives through swift, small grants of under $15,000, alongside training and other forms of support, such as information sharing and opportunities for wider collaboration and advocacy. Through the LAF, Peace Direct partners with country-based organisations (referred to as Hub Organisations) across Asia, Africa and Latin America, who identify local groups to receive grants and support them to collaborate and increase their impact. Another example was the (now closed) Dignity for All: LGBTQI+ Assistance Program, originally funded by the Global Equality Fund of the U.S. State Department, a public–private partnership between governments, corporations and independent foundations that support LGBTQI+ human rights. The programme, which provided flexible emergency funds, support, and security assistance to human rights defenders and organisations under threat or attack due to their work for LGBTQI+ human rights,[21] was run by a global consortium of human rights organisations led by Freedom House, a U.S.-based INGO. Several of the partners were based in the Global South – Akãhatã (Latin America) and UHAI (East Africa) – and all were considered "trusted and recognised organisations in the LGBTQI+ communities where they work and live."[22] Dignity for All provided two types of grants: emergency grants for human rights defenders or CSOs and SOAR (Security, Opportunity, Advocacy Rapid Response) grants, for short-term advocacy initiatives to counteract urgent threats or take advantage of opportunities.

[19] Trust, Accountability, and Inclusion (TAI) collaborative. (2024). From Local Roots to Global Reach: Global South Intermediaries Driving Just and Equitable Governance. Available at: https://tai-collaborative.my.canva.site/intermediaries-study-tai

[20] Philanthropy Dialogues. (May 2024). Understanding the Re-granting Ecosystem in the Global South: Environment, Gender, Social Justice & Human Rights in Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean. With support from Oak Foundation and Ruta civica. Available at: https://philanthropydialogues.org/

[21] U.S. Department of State. (2021-2025). Global Equality Fund. Available at: https://2021-2025.state.gov/global-equality-fund/ [Accessed: 11 August 2025].

[22] Global Philanthropy Project and Cook, B., and Viera, B. (2016). The Road to Successful Partnerships: How governments in the Global North can effectively partner with intermediary organizations to support LGBTI communities in the Global South and East, p.28. Available at: https://globalphilanthropyproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/The-Road-to-Successful-Partnerships-FINAL-7.7.16.pdf. [Accessed: 11 August 2025].

Single-country hub partnership

In addition to providing a crowdfunding platform (a form of direct funding described in the Direct Champion category), GlobalGiving also manages grantmaking funds and often acts as a Connector by partnering with organisations in different contexts to ensure funding is delivered as flexibly as possible to communities often excluded from international funding. As an example, GlobalGiving received funding through Local Works, a USAID funding mechanism, to support the Centre for Disaster Preparedness (CDP) Foundation in the Philippines to create and manage the Abot-Kamay Community Solidarity Fund, with strategic support from a consortium of global partners. This is also an approach often used with its Disaster Fund grantmaking, whereby proximate network organisations provide onward grantmaking to a wide variety of community-based groups.

Although not a distinct subcategory, **fiscal sponsors or hosts** operate as a form of Connector, as they allow more community-driven organisations to launch initiatives without having to formally register.[23]

Origins/reason for existing

Global North Connectors recognise that they are not experts in local and national contexts across the Global South. They therefore act as **conduits** to ensure that organisations more proximate to their contexts make the ultimate grantmaking and support decisions. For Peace Direct, the value of this model lies in elevating community members, local peacebuilders and informal groups, most of whom are receiving international resources for the first time. This in turn strengthens their capacity to act as resource hubs for civil society.

The Hub organisations that Peace Direct partners with in each country then bring their **own funding philosophies and approaches that centre flexibility – often operating similarly to Direct Champions.** For Adeela, a youth-led organisation in Sudan focused on the role of culture and arts in peace and justice, Idrees Nour says flexible funding is:

> **"A whole approach or methodology that guarantees local ownership for local actors. This approach also enables Adeela to remove obstacles in front of local actors in order to make their voices heard."**

Hive Pakistan, a social impact organisation based in Islamabad, notes that:

> **"Flexible funding is not just about adaptable budgets, it is about reimagining power, trust and peace from the ground up. In Pakistan, where donor frameworks often remain overly bureaucratic and centralized, flexible funding allowed Hive to shift power and decision-making into the hands of community-based actors."**

Connectors also often serve as a **buffer** between traditional Global North donors, who have high compliance and other requirements, and the facilitating partners that ultimately disburse the funding to communities. As noted in case of the Abot-Kamay Community Solidarity Fund:

> **"Every aspect was led by CDP's knowledge and insights into the culture, context, and Filipino communities, from the design of the call for proposals, to the grant selection and due diligence process, and [to] monitoring and evaluation. As 'bridging partners', GlobalGiving and the consortium offered advice and support to CDP to navigate the possibilities given the funder's requirements, and carried the weight of funder reporting and risk management responsibility, freeing CDP to develop an approach that worked for communities."** [24]

[23] Non-profit Organisation for Philanthropic Initiatives (Nopi). 'Benefits of Fiscal Sponsorship: Pros & Cons' [Accessed: 05 December 2025). Available at: https://www.thenopi.org/toolkit/fiscal-sponsorship-pros-and-cons#:~:text=Fiscal%20sponsorship%20allows%20organizations%20to%20outsource%20administrative,nonprofit%20entity%2C%20offering%20flexibility%20and%20growth%20opportunities

[24] Center for Disaster Preparedness Philippines and GlobalGiving (n.d.). Transforming Philanthropy & Aid Through New Models of Funding and Partnership 1 Insights from Taking Practical Action to Move Funding Decisions Closer to Communities. [online] Available at: https://www.globalgiving.org/learn/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/GlobalGiving_PositionPaper.pdf [Accessed: 11 August 2025].

On the Dignity for All programme, Freedom House's bridging role between the funder and consortium was recognised by partners. Its overall role in programme administration and focus on emergency grantmaking allowed partners to focus on implementing the SOAR (advocacy-focused grants) and providing security support.[25]

Structural features of Connectors

Partner selection and funding application processes

As the spirit of flexibility is **built into the organisational framing** of Connectors, the partner selection process is designed to align with these principles. At this stage, the Connector and its partners define their terms of engagement, begin to build trust, and explore each other's contexts, expectations, and potential constraints.

Selecting Hub/in-country partners

Connectors adopt different approaches to selecting in-country partners to work with, but the main criteria tends to be **organisations that themselves prioritise flexible approaches to funding that are embedded in their community contexts.** For the LAF, Peace Direct begins with a scoping exercise to identify organisations that are values-aligned and have an appetite to 'unlearn together', recognising that both Global North and South organisations have operated for a long time in the same restrictive funding ecosystems. In some cases, Peace Direct continued work with existing partners, and in others it identified new like-minded partners. Selection criteria for Hub partners considers the organisation's credibility, governance structure, geographical reach, organisational values, potential financial and programmatic capacity to manage a grantmaking system, and its approach to conflict dynamics in the given context

Following this initial selection phase, Connectors broadly adopt the same approach, which is to **entirely delegate the grantmaking application function** to in-country partners that are proximate to the relevant contexts. The in-country partners subsequently adopt processes that are **similar to Direct Champions** (even though these partners generally do much more than just fund, which distinguishes them from most flexible funders), focusing on ensuring the application process is as minimal and inclusive as possible. As one example:

Accessible application processes

CDP in the Philippines launched the first call for proposals through the Abot-Kamay Community Solidarity Fund in May 2022, and received 127 proposals from community-based organisations on the themes of community-led action, community philanthropy, sustainability, and shifting power.

> **"To reduce barriers, the application process was built to be flexible and inclusive, allowing applications to be in the local Filipino dialects and could also be submitted via video."** [26]

How funding decisions are made

Connectors ensure that in-country partners with a deep understanding of the context run the grant decision-making process, providing support if requested. As the first recipient of funds, Connectors focus instead on **satisfying any specific requirements,** very often from traditional donors with, at times, stringent standards.

Due diligence and vetting processes

Connectors think very carefully about how to create due diligence or vetting processes that **balance living the values** of a truly flexible funder with the **pressures they face from traditional donors** in accounting for how the money is spent. For instance, at GlobalGiving the vetting function sits within the programme team, and not with a separate compliance team. They see this as necessary, both as part of relationship-building with partners, as well as fulfilling compliance requirements.

Facilitating partners then design a decision-making process that enables flexibility and inclusivity.

[25] Global Philanthropy Project and Cook, B., and Viera, B. (2016). The Road to Successful Partnerships: How governments in the Global North can effectively partner with intermediary organizations to support LGBTI communities in the Global South and East, p.31. Available at: https://globalphilanthropyproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/The-Road-to-Successful-Partnerships-FINAL-7.7.16.pdfv

[26] Kapoor, S. and Gordo, C. (2023). Transforming Philanthropy: Reimagining Partnerships, Practices, And Power. Global Giving View Points. Available at: https://www.globalgiving.org/learn/transforming-philanthropy [Accessed: 11 August 2025].

Selection committees

A common approach, similar to many Direct Champions, is using a **committee** of people that represent target communities to make decisions on which grants to award. With the Abot-Kamay Community Solidarity Fund in the Philippines, neither GlobalGiving nor any of the international partners involved in the initiative were involved in the selection of grantee partners (a crucial feature of the Connectors model). After reviewing the applications, 32 organisations were selected by members of a community selection committee made up of Filipino representatives from the sector focused on themes such as women, persons with disabilities, and human rights to ensure the process was participatory and inclusive.

Application development support

Some facilitating partners provide less traditional means for developing an application for grant support, precisely because they are embedded in the communities they support in a way that neither Direct Champions nor Connectors are. For instance, Hive in Pakistan created an **idea pitching process** through sharing short videos, after which they provided support in developing concept notes. Ideas are also selected by members of the community that grants are intended for. The initiatives do not need to be structured as a formal NGO or organisation with a bank account – many different types of community response are able to receive funding.

What types of grants are given?

Micro and small grants (approximately ranging from $1,000 to $15,000) **remain a core element and practical tool.** They allow Connectors to help address the gap of bureaucracy and policy restrictions that often prevent traditional philanthropy from funding local actors directly, while also sustaining the work by local actors, that is, 'keeping their doors open'. Further, **micro-grants allow room for experimentation for both the Connector and facilitating partners.** Organisations shared that small grants can help to build confidence on all sides, without needing to take on overwhelming risks. As with Direct Champions, Connectors seek to prioritise multiyear, unrestricted funding, although this can be subject to constraints from the ultimate funder. It is important to note the significant difference between the funding received by Connectors and the funding to facilitating partners or local groups they support. They can vary in amounts and funding mechanisms as shaped by regional and national frameworks, and a dedicated study is needed to fully understand their unique experiences.

Grant management and reporting requirements

Connectors seek to support their facilitating partners in a range of areas related to the management of individual grants, including reporting requirements.

Providing support on reporting to facilitating partners

Connectors, who receive funding directly from traditional Global North donors to then distribute, often seek to **bear as much of the reporting burden** as possible. As part of the LAF, Peace Direct tries to take on as much administrative burden as it can, to limit the load on local partners. Practices to achieve this include ensuring information collected by partners supports their own learning, rather than being a check box exercise; or by allowing partners to report in their own financial templates, and have direct access to Peace Direct's finance team for support. As described by Maaz Salih Idres, having:

> **"A trust-based relationship is the key, as is reducing the contractual burden – we do not let paperwork delay our work. We say yes, and then we figure out how to do it! That's our motto. You respond to a need now, it's not about controlling the funds."**

Support can also be practical. Through the LAF, Peace Direct encourages and accompanies Hub partners to develop strong financial management systems, but this is not a condition of the funding. Funding is often given upfront and in large tranches which affords organisations flexibility, for instance in putting the money into a savings account to earn interest.

Facilitating partner support to grantee partners

When Connectors take on reporting requirements from the upstream donor, this **frees up facilitating partners to support grantee partners** in a similar way. Adeela, a LAF Hub partner in Sudan, supports its grantee partners in writing and completing necessary forms. They also support initiatives that are not legally registered with receiving funds, supporting them with the managerial load.

Thought partnership

Connectors also seek to provide in-country partners and the ultimate grantees with **accompaniment**

support throughout the duration of the grant, as appropriate to the given context. This can range from co-creation, if requested by the facilitating partner, to mentoring and skills sharing, and providing space for networking, advocacy and collaboration. As part of the LAF, Peace Direct supports exchanges between Hub partners and grantees, including a **yearly in-person retreat to foster learning exchanges and solidarity across peacebuilders from different countries.** This is also used as a means for shaping the fund's overall model together with partners. As Peace Direct notes:

> **"Part of decoloniality is not imposing anything on people."**

Internal effects of funding flexibly

Connectors are set apart by their **commitment to sustaining the pressure for more equitable practices and power shifts** in the international funding landscape. Connectors often report undergoing significant internal changes as a result of adopting flexible funding approaches. Peace Direct described this as a process of:

> **"Changing mindsets and unlearning... flexibility is only one ingredient: there is also trust, co-design, redistribution of power, adaptability."**

Connectors often **adopt specific commitments** that guide their approach, although in contrast to Direct Champions these tend to include activities other than funding. Peace Direct's Strategic Plan 2025-2035 commits the organisation to:

> **"Decolonise ourselves and the wider sector," and to "mobilise more unrestricted and flexible funding for our partners and for Peace Direct, including unlocking new sources of funding through services, sponsorship and other non-grant income."**[27]

GlobalGiving has also adopted five community-led commitments that cut across all of its work as a grantmaker. These are to : 1. share power and co-create solutions; 2. listen and be responsive; 3. foster deeper relationships and invite partnerships to transform them; 4. be transparent, reliable, and accountable partners; and 5. identify and eliminate barriers.[28]

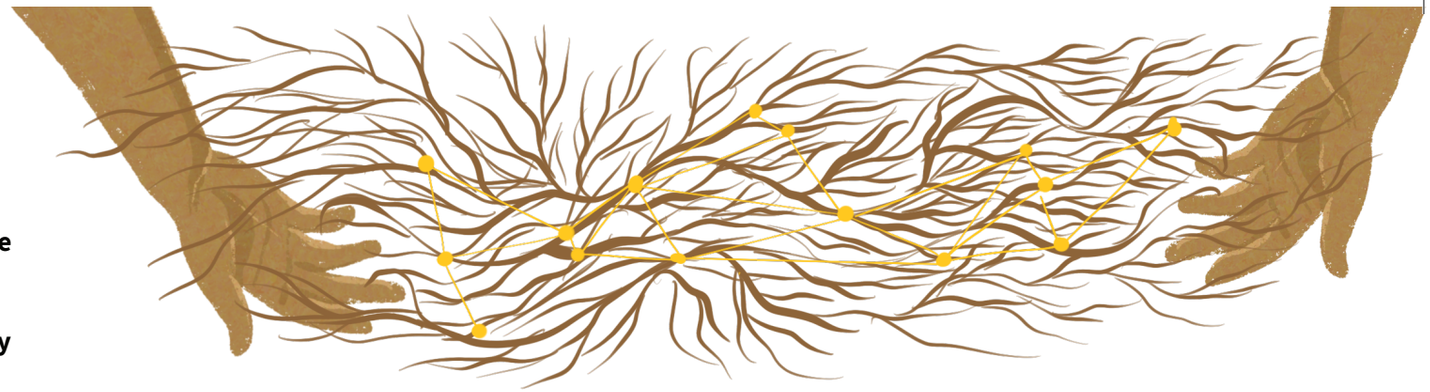
Relationships and funding dependencies

By design, **Connectors are the chainlink between traditional funders and the grantee partners most proximate to the issues at hand.** Though dominantly based in the Global North, their operational reach is outward-facing, that is, they aim to get resources to those most proximate to the issues. Their **uniqueness lies in the infrastructure they offer, including relationships with local and national actors most proximate to focus issues**, enabling funding flows to places that traditional funding channels often struggle to reach. Traditional funders sometimes need real-time examples and direct engagement with local actors in order to grasp the value and practice of flexible funding. Connectors play a key role in making that link. Describing a turning point in the LAF model, Harriet Knox Brown at Peace Direct shared that it took the drastic shift in the Afghanistan context following the fall of Kabul in August 2021, for the value of their partners' work under the LAF to be understood.

> **"In Afghanistan, the initial LAF small grants provided through the Hub partner organisation supported 20 local groups to keep their doors open at a time of significant funding cuts; through this, many of these groups were able to continue their work including successfully advocating at local level for initiatives that benefitted women and other marginalised groups at community level. When sharing stories of impact with other funders, they were mind blown because they didn't think it was possible given the context. Donors were interested in reaching the more informal/vulnerable/under the radar actors working for peace, and not just those based in capitals. There seems to be a willingness amongst donors to support this work, but they may not have the infrastructure, and often have highly restrictive and risk-averse due diligence processes, and so this is not always possible."**

[27] Peace Direct. (2025). Strategic Plan 2025-2035. Available at: https://www.peacedirect.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/pd-organisational-strategy-external-facing.pdf

[28] Global Giving. (2022). We're Committed To Becoming More Community Led. Here's How We'll Do It. Available at: https://www.globalgiving.org/learn/community-led-commitments/



Once Connectors **identify funders that are truly aligned and understand the importance of flexible funding** and their way of working, that relationship becomes **a catalyst for experimentation and innovation.** However few such funders may be, **they provide just enough wiggle room for Connectors to hold the red lines**, enabling them to stay true to their values while pushing the boundaries of what is possible in restrictive funding landscapes.

Challenges for Connectors

While facilitating partners (typically in-country partners or intermediaries in the Global South that are proximate to the communities they serve) is the feature that makes the model work, it is also the source of many of the model's challenges. Connectors admitted to at times **over-relying on their facilitating partners for various elements of the model's operation**, when their core role should be as a bridge and buffer between upstream funders. This can be compounded by the fact that **some Connectors are still shaping the model and, at times, they will not have all processes and structures in place to adequately compensate and support facilitating partners.** As a result, some of the **facilitating partners admitted to experiencing mental and emotional burnout** as they are stretched between partly supporting elements of the Connectors' operational functions and providing ongoing accompaniment to local actors, all while navigating the realities of working in challenging contexts.

Connectors **face the risk of reproducing negative competition and power hierarchies at a local level. This can be damaging to the broader agenda of strengthening locally led development and fostering an environment for local organisations to receive more equitable resources.** Relatedly, while they aim for the facilitating partners they fund to be representative of the communities they serve, **representation can be undiverse and may not always represent the collective interests and realities of local communities** – this can be challenging (especially when compared to some Direct Champions). Nonetheless, many Connectors saw this as an inherent risk and one whose lessons they can use to strengthen the model and relationships. For instance, on their experience with the LAF model, a Hub organisation in DRC shared that they experienced backlash after they selected some local groups but not others. The LAF hub in Pakistan learned from this and decided to give individual feedback to all applicants, including those that were rejected.

Funding relationships in this **model can at times feel transactional depending on their actual design and strength of relationships built**. In cases where the Connector takes a hands off approach, in efforts to centre the local actors, and when the facilitating partner is less involved in the work at local level, the Connector risks becoming detached from the local contexts. This can lead to relationships that feel transactional and, for some facilitating partners, inadvertently tokenistic.

Benefits of the model

The success of Connectors can to some degree be measured by their ability to 'reinvent the INGO', by "facilitating, investing in, and enabling the role of national and local CSOs to take the spotlight, both in their own societies and internationally."[29] When they do, **Connectors enable environments of collaboration** between Global North funders and Global South CSOs, with facilitating partners noting that they did not feel like mere recipients but equals. This partnership breaks down the hierarchies that have historically defined those relationships. Many Connectors emphasised that they were learning as they go, which spoke to the trust and equity they have built into the relationship with local actors. More importantly, **Connectors enable horizontal peer-peer collaboration. Often, the facilitating partner role creates a social glue that anchors the work in the community and that lays the ground for sustainability in the long run. The horizontal collaboration has seen a redefining of accountability at the local level, from something that is centred on individual organisations to accountability to entire communities.**

[29] Doane, D. (2024). The INGO Problem: Power, Privilege, and Renewal. Practical Action Publishing. p19


EXPERIMENTERS

EXPERIMENTERS

Snapshot description

Organisations that do not operate entirely as flexible funders, but which have succeeded in creating discrete flexible funding channels – either through direct funding, like Direct Champions, or indirectly, like Connectors. Through these channels, Experimenters can enable more flexible funding to flow within an otherwise traditional funding environment.

Sub-categories

Global North INGO funds

Many Global North INGOs also operate as funders, whether as fund managers, regranters, or something else. While most use traditional top-down funding mechanisms, **INGO Experimenters succeed in creating specific instruments that adopt elements of flexible funding.** One example is the Oxfam Partners' Investment Fund (PIF), created to provide flexible funding to partner organisations in the Global South.[30] The PIF provided a total of £1.5 million in funding over a three year period, later extending to four. PIF's main ethos is said to be that it is trust-based programming – assuming that everyone is there to do the best job they can – and trying to do away with as many checks and balances as is safe.

Bilateral donor support for women's funds

Bilateral donors have a track record of mobilising resources to support women's funds, in recognition of the funding gap on gender equality in foreign aid. A prominent example is the Equality Fund, which channels long-term, core and flexible funding to underfunded global grassroots women's organisations and movements in the Global South. The Government of Canada contributed CAD $300 million in August 2019 to establish the initiative. There were several funding streams, including direct funding to women's rights and feminist organisations, as well as to feminist funds that subgrant to local and grassroots organisations. The Equality Fund also provided funding to networks, coalitions and consortia.[31] Another prominent example, funded by the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs as part of the Dutch Policy on Women's Rights and Gender Equality[32] and the Policy Framework 'Dialogue and Dissent,[33] is the aforementioned LFS programme.[34] Following sustained lobbying efforts by a broad coalition of feminists and women's rights funds and advocates, the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs provided initial funding of 42 million euros in 2017 over four years, scaled up to 80 million euros funding over five years (with support from Fondation Chanel in the second phase). The women's funds provide flexible grants to women's organisations and change agents in the Global South, invest in capacity strengthening, promote advocacy and build partnerships across regional and global alliances.

Bilateral donor programme funding

In some cases, bilateral Development Assistance Committee (DAC) donors [35] create specific programmes to channel funding that is more flexible than is possible in their usual bilateral programming. In 2020, the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) partnered with Comic

[30] Oxfam GB (n.d.). Oxfam GB's Decolonial Partnerships Strategy Putting Respect, Solidarity, and Accountability at the Heart of Our Relationship with Partners. [online] Available at: https://www.oxfam.org.uk/documents/774/Oxfam-GB-Decolonial-Partnerships-Strategy.pdf. p.9

[31] OECD. (July 2024). Bridging the Funding Gap for Women's Rights Organisations: Canada's Support Through the Equality Fund. Case Study. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/development-co-operation-tips-tools-insights-practices_be69e0cf-en/bridging-the-funding-gap-for-women-s-rights-organisations-canada-s-support-through-the-equality-fund_6aa9a5d1-en.html#:~:text=Approach&text=Gender%20equality%20is%20at%20the,to%20networks%2C%20coalitions%20and%20consortia

[32] Government of the Netherlands. Human Rights Worldwide: Equal Rights for Women and Girls. [Accessed 12 December 2025.] Available at: https://www.government.nl/topics/human-rights/human-rights-worldwide/equal-rights-for-women-and-girls#:~:text=Dutch%20efforts%20to%20strengthen%20the,of%20women%20and%20girls%20worldwide

[33] Government of the Netherlands. (2016). Policy Framework: Dialogue and Dissent. Available at: https://www.government.nl/documents/regulations/2014/05/13/policy-framework-dialogue-and-dissent

[34] As noted, LFS is a collaboration between four Global South women's funds (all Direct Champions): African Women's Development Fund (AWDF), Fondo de Mujeres del Sur (FMS), International Indigenous Women's Forum (FIMI)/ AYNI Fund, and Women's Fund Asia.

[35] OECD (n.d.). Development Assistance Committee. [online] OECD. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/en/about/committees/development-assistance-committee.html.

Relief, a UK-based foundation, to invest up to £60 million over ten years to support the capacity and sustainability of locally led civil society organisations in Ghana, Zambia and Malawi through four 'Anchor Partners' (similar to the Connector approach): Star Ghana Foundation, Tilitonse Foundation, the West Africa Civil Society Institute (WACSI) and the Zambian Governance Foundation. Named 'Shifting the Power – Strengthening African Civil Society', the programme aimed "to challenge the status quo in philanthropy and development by fundamentally centring locally-led, participatory, co-created, democratic and distributed ways of working."[36] Another example is the 'Resourcing Change: supporting women's rights organisations in fragile and conflict-affected states' programme, which provided core, flexible and accessible funding – in recognition of women's rights organisations' greater knowledge and experience of their contexts. Funded by the UK's Integrated Security Fund, the project was delivered between July 2021 and March 2025 through a consortium partnership between Saferworld, Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), WILPF Nigeria, and Women for Women International. These organisations provided women's rights organisations and hubs with flexible core funding, aiming to strengthen their individual and collective roles in leading programmes and advocacy on women, peace and security.[37] In total, the project distributed £2.74 million to 24 women's rights organisations and hubs in Nigeria, South Sudan and Yemen, with an average of £28,572 per organisation.[38] In many cases, the consortium members already had partners across the three countries, which they were able to support with flexible funding through Resourcing Change. In addition, £607,631 was used to support movement building, self-identified capacity strengthening and mentoring activities across all countries, while £164,815 was allocated to convening cross-learning spaces for partner organisations.

Bilateral donor embassy-level funding

Some bilateral DAC donors are able to mobilise more flexible funding through embassies in partner countries, as opposed to centrally managed bilateral programmes. In 2023, the OECD reported that:

> **"Many of Sweden's embassies provide trust-based, multi-year, flexible direct funding for partner-country civil society actors, including core, programme, or project support. The grants are of all sizes and the collaboration is managed the same way as partnerships with Swedish or international CSOs."[39]**

A specific example is a programme managed out of the Norwegian Embassy in Brazil, aiming to channel 90% of its funding as direct grants to organisations run by indigenous people. The Norwegian Indigenous Peoples Programme has been running in Brazil since 1982, and managed through the embassy since 2022, and has always provided direct support to CSOs. Over the last three years, the programme has disbursed roughly $9 million a year, and since 2017 has been fully integrated into Norway's International Climate and Forest Initiative, which is administered jointly by the Norwegian Ministry of Climate and the Environment in collaboration with Norad, the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation.[40]

Donor pooled funds

Generally speaking, a pooled fund is a mechanism that allows multiple donors – often bilateral governments – to contribute un-earmarked financial resources to a single fund designed to support a common set of programmes or projects. Pooled funds are most common in the humanitarian sector and are often set up by United Nations donors.[41,42]

[36] Comic Relief. (2025). Shifting the Power. Available at: https://www.comicrelief.com/funding/tackling-injustices/shifting-the-power/

[37] Saferworld (2022). Resourcing Change: Supporting Women's Rights Organisations in Fragile and Conflict-affected States. Available at: https://www.saferworld-global.org/resources/publications/1406-resourcing-change-supporting-womenas-rights-organisations-in-fragile-and-conflict-affected-states

[38] Ahmed, F. (2025). Influencing Change Through Flexible Funding: Conversations with Women's Rights Organisations in Nigeria, South Sudan and Yemen. Learning paper. Saferworld, Women for Women International, WILPF. Available at: https://www.saferworld-global.org/resources/publications/1466-influencing-change-through-flexible-funding-conversations-with-womenas-rights-organisations-in-nigeria-south-sudan-and-yemen

[39] OECD. (2023). Funding Civil Society in Partner Countries: Toolkit for Implementing the DAC Recommendation on Enabling Civil Society in Development Co-operation and Humanitarian Assistance. Best Practices in Development Co-operation. p.22. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2023/05/funding-civil-society-in-partner-countries_9462bbeb/9ea40a9c-en.pdf

[40] Norway's International Climate and Forest Initiative. (2024). 40 Years of Support to Indigenous Peoples – Norway's International Climate and Forest Initiative. [online] Available at: https://www.nicfi.no/2024/02/09/40-years-of-nipp/ [Accessed: 11 August 2025].

[41] ICVA Network. (2024). Guidance Note for Donors Promoting Inclusive and Locally-led Action Through Humanitarian Pooled Funds. Available at: https://www.icvanetwork.org/uploads/2024/11/Donor-Guidance-on-promoting-inclusive-and-locally-led-action-through-humanitarian-pooled-funds.pdf [Accessed: 14 July 2025].

[42] Flexible Funding Report 2023. rep. UNHCR. 2014. Available at: https://www.unhcr.org/publications/flexible-funding-report-2023 [Accessed: 14 July 2025]

Origins/reason for existing

Highly 'traditional' or mainstream funders, especially bilateral donors, are generally **unable to transition their entire organisations** in a way that fully aligns with the philosophy and principles of flexible funding and local leadership to take place. However, **sometimes opportunistic moments arise**, when a traditional organisation has a pot of funding outside of its mainstream funds that needs to be spent, and there happens to be capacity, progressive thinking and leadership that allows for the funding to be channeled flexibly. In at least one case, a visionary senior person inside the organisation was able to obtain Board sign off on the understanding that the pot of money approved was experimental and learning-focused.

Structural features of Experimenters

There are no standard structural features across all Experimenters, given that each funder generally takes advantage of specific opportunities as they arise at a given moment. Some examples of features include:

Consultations with experts

In conceptualising LFS, various women's funds took part in a consultation process that succeeded in influencing a Dutch minister and members of the Gender Task Force team, who pushed internally for allocating flexible funds to Southern-based feminist movements. As mentioned previously, Mama Cash, Women's Fund Asia, AWDF and many other women's funds then successfully brokered the creation of the programme, demonstrating how an entire ecosystem was able to come together in partnership with a traditional bilateral funder.[43]

Openness to negotiation and changes

Under LFS, the women's funds implementing the programme were able to provide larger grants – $90,000 for three years, and $200,000 for regional organisations focused on advocacy, influencing and capacity building. At the beginning, the funds could only be used for project work, but thanks to negotiation by the women's funds, organisations were able to spend 30% of the budget on core costs and 40% for grassroots movements. The women's funds involved described how LFS was a learning process for the Dutch government, and demonstrated using clear evidence on how to resource and bring about change in a feminist way across the Global South.

Pushing the boundaries of adaptability

Experimenters can sometimes be among the most flexible of funders, enabling grantee partners to spend the money in whichever way they choose. At least one has ensured that once the flexible funding has been disbursed, there is no set timeframe within which to spend the funds. An evaluation of the Equality Fund found that grantees appreciated the trust-based, feminist partnerships formed with the fund and its key partners (which included the African Women's Development Fund), noting that they did not impose thematic priorities, activities or project funding. The Equality Fund also adopted flexible reporting approaches that emphasised narratives of change, and adopted simplified due diligence approaches to minimise burden on applicants and grantees.[44]

Role modelling for other traditional funders

As a result of funding received through LFS, Women's Fund Asia was able to access funding from another bilateral donor, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade in Australia. Another fund partner, AWDF, has been able to use the LFS model and its successes to raise resources from other government donors and private philanthropy.



[43] Moosa, Z., and Jessop, S. (2022). In Movement Together: Reflecting on a Decade with Mama Cash. Mama Cash. Available at: https://www.mamacash.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/221130_mc_farewell_letter_af-digital.pdf

[44] Global Affairs Canada. (April 2024). Formative Evaluation of the Partnership for Gender Equality. Prepared by the Evaluation Division (PRA). Available at: https://www.international.gc.ca/transparency-transparence/assets/pdfs/audit-evaluation-verification/2024/pge-report-rapport-en.pdf

Internal effects of funding flexibly

As noted above, it is harder for Experimenters to be truly transformed at an organisational level through flexible funding practices. However, being an Experimenter can create an organisational opening or entrypoint for change. This sentiment was echoed by one Global North INGO noting that flexible funding requires taking a principled position that this is what you want to do, and accepting that there will be mistakes and lessons. The cost of those mistakes, however, should not fall on the Experimenter's country office and local partners. Disallowances would, in effect, become impossible, because partners spend the money however they choose. This Experimenter went on to note that it is important to be in solidarity with partners – especially those that are guided by the principle of 'decolonising partnerships'[45] – by dismantling internal barriers that exist more from habit than necessity. There is **very little evidence from bilateral donors** on the ways funding flexibly has affected their internal structures, policies or practices. Dedicated research is needed to better understand the range, mechanics and impact of flexible funding by Experimenters.

Relationships and funding dependencies

Experimenters are semi-autonomous units within larger, traditionally structured organisations. They are hence built upon the resourcing infrastructures, legitimacy and pre-existing networks of their institutions, and remain tethered to them throughout their development. This means that the **relationships they spend most of their efforts navigating are internal ones.** Although Experimenters may be designed to operate flexibly, with lighter application and reporting processes, **implementation is often still subject to internal legal and compliance frameworks**. Unsurprisingly, therefore, **their success is heavily tied to internal champions, top-down leadership, and their ability to secure buy-in across the wider organisation.** To stand a chance of survival, **Experimenters often operate under the radar, deliberately framing themselves as experimental rather than drivers of structural shifts – a positioning that reduces perceived risk and avoids drastic disruption.** As one Experimenter put it:

> **"The board never signed off [on the full idea – because there wasn't one formed from the outset], but signed off on the experimental use of money. We used the term experimental a lot to guard against fear of failure becoming an issue."**

Challenges for Experimenters

While Experimenters offer a promising space for flexible funding within larger institutions, they often face an uphill climb. Many Experimenters described their experiences setting up flexible funding models as **swimming against the tide,**



with new approaches often perceived as 'scary'. One Experimenter explained that this was because "people are being asked to [...] do things they are not used to and that's not an easy thing to do in a big organisation." They further note that to remedy this 'shock', **there needs to be more time and intention in preparing the ground for people to acclimatise to the new thinking and approach.** Expectedly, **the process of introducing the model within an otherwise rigid way of operating creates friction, often feeding into the inherent competition in the sector.** Such conditions are bound to counteract progress, making it difficult for the model to take root in the broader organisation.

As the model is dependent on individuals, **they often have a small window for those ideas to root and spread through the rest of the organisation. As such, Experimenters, with a few exceptions,[46] can be difficult to sustain or scale.** Without top-down backing, Experimenters risk being quietly discontinued once key champions move on, are absorbed back into existing conventional frameworks, or frozen out by the very structures they aim to shift. **If discontinued, this can be damaging**

[45] Peace Direct. (2021). Time to Decolonise Aid. [online] Peace Direct. Available at: https://www.peacedirect.org/time-to-decolonise-aid/ [Accessed: 11 Aug. 2025].
[46] Usher, A.D. (2025) 'The anomaly. How a cutting-edge scheme in Brasilia gives direct grants to indigenous funds', Development Today, 12 June. Available at: https://www.development-today.com/archive/2025/dt-5--2025-1/the-anomaly [Accessed: 18 June 2025].

to partnerships and relationships established at its formation, as Experimenters backtrack on some of their promises. It **undermines trust with local actors and communities.** As noted by the Resourcing Change programme funded by the UK government, it still "*operates within the confines of the wider funding system,*" and illustrates a deeper challenge:

> **"Even when flexible funding works well in practice, it remains vulnerable to a system that continues to favour short-term, rigid and top-down approaches."[47]**

The first months or years among Experimenters are not necessarily the hardest – sustaining the model is usually the challenge. It is therefore at the point of design that their focus and intention should be on sustainability.

Benefits of the model

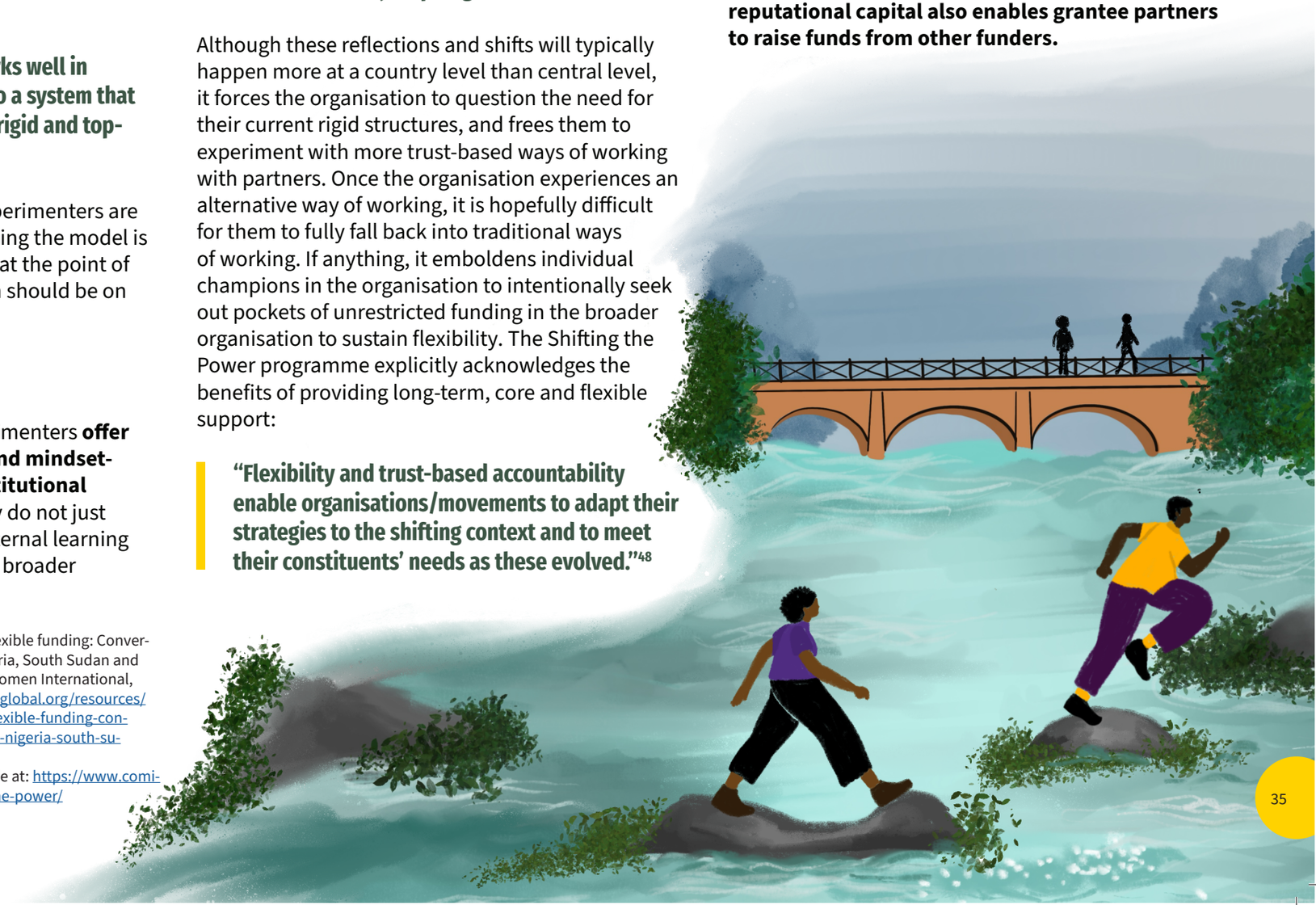
Despite their relative fragility, Experimenters **offer important spaces for innovation and mindset-shift within an otherwise rigid institutional environment.** When successful they do not just affect local actors; they also seed internal learning and offer a starting point to shift the broader organisational culture and mindsets about flexible funding. Oxfam's PIF, for instance, is:

> **"Helping [them] experiment with what are the real limitations to being flexible as possible with money or procedures and what are the imaginary ones that we're just piling on ourselves."**

Although these reflections and shifts will typically happen more at a country level than central level, it forces the organisation to question the need for their current rigid structures, and frees them to experiment with more trust-based ways of working with partners. Once the organisation experiences an alternative way of working, it is hopefully difficult for them to fully fall back into traditional ways of working. If anything, it emboldens individual champions in the organisation to intentionally seek out pockets of unrestricted funding in the broader organisation to sustain flexibility. The Shifting the Power programme explicitly acknowledges the benefits of providing long-term, core and flexible support:

> **"Flexibility and trust-based accountability enable organisations/movements to adapt their strategies to the shifting context and to meet their constituents' needs as these evolved."[48]**

For grantee partners, Experimenters afford them much needed control. Because the funds are unrestricted, many tend to channel the resources to typically underfunded areas such as advocacy, communication, safeguarding and wellbeing. In some cases, partners have gone to the length of using the funds to build reserves. Experimenters' **reputational capital also enables grantee partners to raise funds from other funders.**



[47] Ahmed, F. (2025). Influencing change through flexible funding: Conversations with women's rights organisations in Nigeria, South Sudan and Yemen. Learning paper. Saferworld, Women for Women International, WILPF p.17. Available at: https://www.saferworld-global.org/resources/publications/1466-influencing-change-through-flexible-funding-conversations-with-womenas-rights-organisations-in-nigeria-south-sudan-and-yemen

[48] Comic Relief. (2025). Shifting the Power. Available at: https://www.comicrelief.com/funding/tackling-injustices/shifting-the-power/


CONVENER-ADVOCATES

CONVENER-ADVOCATES

Snapshot description

Organisations that convene flexible funders and other stakeholders, produce knowledge, and advocate for flexible funding across the ecosystem. Convener-Advocates do not necessarily fund grantee partners directly, but some provide funds to support the work and advocacy efforts of flexible funders.

Sub-categories

While Direct Champions and Connectors also convene and advocate for flexible funding, Convener-Advocates **specialise** in creating networks of flexible funders, conducting joint advocacy and producing different types of knowledge on flexible funding.

Flexible funding networks

Direct Champions, particularly those that operate in the feminist funding space, have always recognised the importance of building wider ecosystems of values-aligned funders:

- Prospera International Network of Women's and Feminist Funds is a global political network of 47 international, regional, subregional and national women's and feminist funds, who collectively provide over 2,800 grants to women's organisations across 172 countries.[49] Prospera has grown from a peer-learning network into a more structured, membership-driven service organisation.
- Networks also exist at the country level. Rede Comuá, for instance, is a Brazilian network that brings together thematic and community funds, community foundations, and independent grantmakers to mobilise resources for civil society in the areas of socio-environmental justice, human rights and community development. The network currently has 18 members from across Brazil. Comuá's Advocacy Programme is an initiative dedicated to advancing the cause of community philanthropy at the local, national and international levels.
- Other funding networks include EDGE Funders Alliance (Engaged Donors for Global Equity) and Ariadne.

Advocates and knowledge producers

Other Convener-Advocates specialise in advocacy and producing knowledge to support the case for flexible funding. Examples include:

- The Share Trust, an organisation that supports and strengthens Self Help Groups and advocates for direct international funding to local actors.
- The Radical Flexibility Fund, an organisation that is both a network of partners and a producer of knowledge and resources on how to make flexible funding a reality.
- Other organisations focus on the practicalities of operationalising flexible funding. For example, Humentum, in collaboration with Connective Impact, has led a working group to develop a flexible funding attributes framework for funders.[50]

Origins/reason for existing

Convener-Advocates campaign actively for **systems change and mutual accountability in the funding ecosystem**, and support funders with resources



[49] https://prospera-inwf.org/member-funds/

[50] Camara, M. and Anda, A. (2024). Embracing Flexible Funding: A Call to Action for Funders. [online] Humentum. Available at: https://humentum.org/blog-media/embracing-flexible-funding-a-call-to-action-for-funders/?utm_source=chatgpt.com [Accessed: 12 August 2025].

and support on how to **improve or amplify flexible funding practices.** Prospera specifically focuses on building collective power across feminist movements by advocating for flexible funding, providing capacity building support, and specifically making the case for women's funds, who have been some of the pioneers of trust-based funding for many decades.

Similarly, Rede Comuá, which describes itself as a network weaver, both advocates for community-led, flexible funding, and works to strengthen its members' capacity for joint action, including through Communities of Practice in various areas.[51] As described by Rede Comuá:

> **"Progressive social movements in Brazil exist despite traditional philanthropy, not because of it.[52] Traditional philanthropy is still resistant to flexible funding, and community philanthropy in particular. It is very controlling! Resources are tied to specific communities, and they expect people to follow the original plan."**

Beyond Brazil, the network also focuses on collaborating with others across the Global South, building South–South alliances.

As noted above, Direct Champions in particular also convene and advocate for changes in the funding system. For instance, the Global Fund for Community Foundations is the steward of #ShiftThePower, a global movement advocating for a more equitable paradigm of people-based development.

Structural features of Convener-Advocates

Convener-Advocates do not directly fund grantee partners that implement activities at the community level, but some have created targeted pots of funding to **support flexible funders** – often, but not always, members of their networks. This support has been particularly important recently in a context where traditional bilateral funders have drastically cut their aid budgets. Direct Champions, and women's and feminist funds in particular, often need extra support, given their long-term dedication to flexible funding. Chhavi Doonga from Prospera noted that:

> **"Women's funds have taken the burden that other foundations don't want to take on. During the funding cuts, a lot of funders were looking to women's funds to fill the gaps because they have strong relationships with their grantees. Women's funds are early alarm detections for movements, because they are so close to their communities."**

Rede Comuá also provides strategic grants for members to participate in or organise activities related to the network itself, such as Transforming Philanthropy month in September. Comuá's role is also to promote collaboration across members as part of these activities.

Relationships and funding dependencies

As noted above, Convener-Advocates are **deeply relational by design.** Their primary function is to weave narratives and networks to achieve systems change and promote mutual accountability. This makes them part of the **connective tissue that sustains progressive thinking across the sector.** Their success in nesting themselves within the broader funding landscape is dependent on their ability to attract membership from diverse individual organisations and funders with shared values and trust. **Their value and strength is therefore in their numbers,[53] as they offer a critical mass of organisations** and funds that various actors in the sector can engage through a single and coordinated space. Indeed many funders highlighted Convener-Advocates as **key spaces to nurture peer-to-peer influencing**, especially among the more traditional funders and bilaterals. Though distinct and standalone models, their function tends to complement and amplify advocacy and convening efforts by Direct Champions and Connectors, with the possibility of converging these into sector-wide movements and momentum.

Challenges for Convener-Advocates

A key challenge is demonstrating its value within a funding landscape that prioritises measurable outputs, and whose relationships are centred on money-based resourcing. This means that their **contributions are difficult to quantify and therefore difficult to fund.** Because Convener-Advocate models are built on shared values, they run the risk of forming an echo-chamber. Aware of

[51] Rede Comuá. 'Quem somos' (About us). Available at: https://redecomua.org.br/en/quem-somos/ [Accessed: 05 December 2025].
[52] Rede Comuá. (October 2024). Social Movements and Philanthropy in Brazil. Available at: https://redecomua.org.br/social-movements-and-philanthropy/
[53] The size of these networks varies widely, from smaller networks of a few dozen members such as the Gender Funders Co-Lab to large-scale platforms, with Ariadne being the largest in our sample, bringing together over 600 members across regions and sectors.

this challenge, one Convener noted that they not only curate their own spaces for their members but also have been intentional about strategically becoming part of spaces with actors who do not always think alike.This, they believe, is equally, if not more important than creating member spaces, as it exposes traditional funders and corporations to perspectives and practices they may not typically engage. Another challenge is that while Convener-Advocates may boast a large membership, often, their **secretariat (i.e. core staff) is intentionally lean.** To place it in perspective, Rede Comuá shared:

> **"We are 18 members [and], if you count all involved, it's 400 people and the network [secretariat] is 7 people."**

This, as noted by one Convener-Advocate, can constrain action and sometimes make it difficult to align and manage diverse perspectives. However, this challenge is also reflective of the model's purpose as it is aimed at convening and amplifying many voices, rather than concentrating power at the centre.

Benefits of the model

Convener-Advocates help **surface emerging narratives, and build solidarity and strengthen collaboration** across geographic and sectoral divisions, as part of broader efforts to shift power in the international aid system. These models are the most promising in a) **converging thinking and narrative building** on alternative ways of funding, and b) **creating spaces for silences and pauses**[54] for such processes to happen. With traditional donors removed from the lived realities of local actors, this model also partly bridges this gap, offering an opportunity for funders to get a glimpse of grantee-partner work, especially when they are directly represented in those spaces. Convener-Advocates are also **great platforms for experimentation**. They allow members the opportunity to meet like-minded actors that can co-create programmes that circumvent funding restrictions baked into the system. Connectors and Direct Champions shared multiple examples of various joint funding, advocacy and consortia, and collaborative research that formed through Convener-Advocate spaces.

Both the Global Alliance for Green and Gender Action and the LFS programme said they have influenced and been influenced by Prospera and the Global Resilience Fund for Women and Girls, among others. Funders also noted that Convener-Advocates play a particularly important role in the current funding crisis.

Reflecting on the responses to the abrupt USAID funding cuts earlier this year, Rede Comuá explains how their network resorted to a timely and unified response to the Stop Work orders:

> **"Many members receive funds from a U.S. government agency – several including Rede Comuá were asked to give money back. [...][We] united our judicial efforts to respond using the experience and sharing with other actors not part of the network. We shared externally so we could have a coordinated response within and outside the network. There was the guarantee to have a solution to a common problem. Philanthropy can't thrive without democracy."**



[54] Deven, M.V. and Myrum, J. (2024) How to Fund Narrative Ecosystems, Nonprofit Quarterly. Available at: https://nonprofitquarterly.org/how-to-fund-narrative-ecosystems/ [Accessed: 09 July 2025].

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This report has aimed to provide a detailed description of the nuts and bolts that enable different models of flexible funding to operate in a wide range of contexts. The table below summarises the key features across each of the models.

Summary of key features across flexible funding models

Model	Key structural features	Scaling and replication
Direct Champions 	**Sub-categories: Intersectional feminist funds, community-led funds, community (philanthropy) foundations, crowdfunding, membership and network funds, and in some cases Northern philanthropic funders.** **Application processes** - Most have specific funding windows, but some accept proposals year-round. - Most have open calls, while others reach out to applicants directly. - Common requirement that groups be self-led by the constituencies they intend to benefit. - Some form of light-touch written proposal usually required, alongside conversations with applicants where feasible, but all funders emphasise that plans can change. **Decision-making processes** - Advisory or oversight groups that are representative of focus communities review applications and make decisions. E.g. advisory networks, committees and oversight bodies. - In networks and membership organisations, representatives from members make decisions. - Voting-based approaches, often in tandem with advisory or oversight bodies,	- The ability of this model to be scaled depends on the ability to access unrestricted funding (often from traditional donors, bilateral or philanthropic). Once this funding is in place, Direct Champions are able to mobilise large amounts of flexible funding – for instance, members of the Prospera Network mobilise an average of $120 million each year to women's organisations across 172 countries.[55] - Direct Champions are often the first funder for a grantee partner, creating an opportunity for other funders to step in and scale up impact at the most local level. - Replication by others is possible. It requires organisational commitment and investment in an infrastructure that allows inclusive and equitable application, decision-making and management/ reporting processes to be set up. Once this infrastructure is in place, it can be replicated in other

[55] See Prospera: International Network of Women's Funds. Available at: https://prospera-inwf.org/member-funds/#:~:text=Each%20year%2C%20Prospera's%20s%20members,women's%20organizations%20across%20172%20countries.

Model	Key structural features	Scaling and replication
	where applicants can vote for each others' proposals. - In some forms of participatory grantmaking, no standard applications required – organisations themselves decide together how to allocate funds. **Grant management and reporting** - Management and reporting processes are designed to be as minimal and flexible as possible, allowing organisations the freedom to pursue their goals. - Due diligence procedures are implemented in a way that reinforces trust and accountability. - Reporting requirements are simplified, and most funders encourage participatory approaches to monitoring, evaluation and learning. **Grants and accompaniment support** - Grants are provided directly to grantee partners, generally ranging from $2,000 to $100,000, are multiyear, and can generally be used to support any type of activity (project-focused or otherwise). Direct Champions also provide non-financial accompaniment support, including training, wellbeing support, and movement-building opportunities.	geographies, but requires some additional resourcing to ensure that these processes are robust and relevant to different contexts.
Connectors 	**Sub-categories: Multi-country hub partnerships, single-country hub partnerships, and in some cases fiscal sponsors or hosts** **Partner selection processes** - No direct application process. Instead, Connectors select facilitating partners to issue calls for applications tailored to their specific contexts. - Different selection approaches exist, but the main criteria tends to be organisations that prioritise flexible approaches to funding and that are embedded in their community contexts. **Due diligence and decision-making** - Due diligence or vetting processes seek to balance their commitment to the values of flexible funding against the pressures from traditional donors in accounting for how the money is spent. - Facilitating partners then design a decision-making process that enables	- The potential for this model to be scaled, either within a single country or across different countries, also depends on the ability to mobilise more resources - ideally unrestricted - from traditional donors (bilateral or philanthropic). Scale can be achieved either by working with additional facilitating partners in one country, or through working in additional countries. - The model can be replicated by organisations that are able to commit time and resources to develop flexible funding procedures and support facilitating partners with their requests and needs.

Model	Key structural features	Scaling and replication
	flexibility and inclusivity, similar to those of Direct Champions. **Support to facilitating partners** - Connectors, who receive funding directly from traditional Global North donors, seek to bear as much of the reporting burden as possible. This frees up facilitating partners to support grantee partners in a similar way. - Connectors also seek to provide in-country partners and the ultimate grantees with accompaniment support and thought partnership throughout the duration of a grant, as appropriate to the given context.	
Experimenters 	*There are no standard structural features across all Experimenters, given that each funder takes advantage of specific opportunities as they arise, and therefore they are free to adopt aspects of either the Direct Champions or Connectors models.* **Other common features** - Experimenters often conduct consultations with experts to assist in the design of a flexible funding channel or mechanism. Through this, there is often room for negotiation, for instance on the ability to use funds for core costs rather than projects. - Precisely because Experimenters frame their funding as 'experimental', they are often able to secure high degrees of freedom for their grantee partners, for instance by providing direct, multiyear and core funding. - By funding in this way, Experimenters often enable grantee partners to mobilise additional resources from other more 'traditional' funders.	The success of Experimenters is often tied to the leadership of internal champions and their ability to negotiate buy-in across the broader organisation. However, the model has the potential to be highly scalable if this translates to a large budget sign-off (for instance, the Dutch government provided €42 million in the first phase of the Leading from the South programme, (2017-2021) scaled up to €80 million in the second phase (2020-2025).[56]
Convener- Advocates 	**Sub-categories: Flexible funding networks, advocates and knowledge producers** - Convener-Advocates provide key spaces to nurture peer-to-peer influencing, especially among the more traditional bilateral and philanthropic funders. - Convener-Advocates do not typically fund grantee partners, but many offer funding to flexible funders to assist with organisational development and learning, including through peer-to-peer learning grants.	- This model is highly replicable and, funding dependent, scalable – most Convener-Advocates operate either nationally or globally, and organisations considering this model should first seek to identify whether they can support existing networks and organisations.

[56] See the LFS programme website: https://www.leadingfromthesouth.org/about-us

Considerations before committing to a flexible funding programme

Before committing to any flexible funding programme, consider the following:

- Whichever model you choose, flexible funding in the way we have described it in this report is as much a philosophy of solidarity as it is an approach to civil society resourcing. Flexible funding should not be considered a technical fix to overcome the challenges of implementing programmes in volatile and unpredictable contexts. While it does achieve that aim, its purpose is much deeper, as many of the DIRECT CHAMPIONS reported. Accordingly, donors wishing to implement a flexible funding programme should carefully examine their worldviews, mindsets and organisational cultures to determine if they are committed to working in ways that support and strengthen the agency, dignity and power of local actors.
- Recognise that a commitment to funding flexibly requires a whole of organisation approach that goes beyond compliance, risk and due diligence. It includes monitoring, evaluation and learning, communication frequency and styles, partnership practices, and above all, strategy and purpose.

If you are an organisation with financial resources that is considering which flexible funding model would best suit your work, we provide the following high-level guidance:

- If you have funds and a desire to channel flexibly, but no infrastructure to disburse funding to grantee partners (directly or indirectly), **we recommend becoming a contributor through providing core funding and other support to DIRECT CHAMPIONS and CONNECTORS.**
- If you have a mature grantmaking infrastructure and the resources to engage directly and deeply with partners, **we recommend adopting the DIRECT CHAMPION model.**
- If you have an organisational philosophy that supports flexible funding but are seeking to strengthen the ecosystem of local and national support organisations rather than funding directly, **we recommend adopting the CONNECTOR model by engaging with facilitating partners proximate to communities in the areas you wish to fund.**
- DIRECT CHAMPIONS and CONNECTORS share many similarities, and there are many opportunities for these two groups of funders and regranters to learn from each other. Allocate more time to do this, and promote this learning more intentionally.
- If you do not have the necessary funding infrastructure or organisational philosophy, but see an opportunity to fund flexibly, **we recommend becoming an EXPERIMENTER, with a longer-term vision of fully adopting either the DIRECT CHAMPION or CONNECTOR models.** The very existence of the EXPERIMENTER model proves that it is possible to fund flexibly even if the majority of the organisation is more top-down or hierarchical in its funding approaches.

  Practical steps along the journey could include:

  1. Introducing flexibility in the application process by relaxing proposal requirements and allowing other formats and languages to be accepted.
  2. Introducing flexibility in the decision-making process, by either:

     a) Appointing a group that is representative of the people you aim to benefit from your funding, and empowering them to make decisions on applications (Direct Champion feature).

     b) Partnering with organisations that are most proximate to the people you aim to benefit from your funding, and entirely delegating decision-making to them.
  3. Simplifying due diligence and reporting processes to enable grantee partners to focus on delivering the work.
  4. Providing as much unrestricted funding as possible, allowing grantee partners to deliver against their own strategic priorities, alongside non-financial accompaniment to support grantee partners with other needs.

- If you are an EXPERIMENTER, it is important to consider how to ensure that lessons learned from such pilots are embedded within the strategy and philosophy of the wider organisation.

Currently, too many lessons are lost within large organisations due to the siloing of departments, distinct organisational cultures and personnel changes. Cross departmental learning teams or learning circles should be established when organisations embark on any flexible funding experiment.

- If you are not a funder yourself but are passionate about promoting and supporting flexible funding models and approaches, **we recommend that you become a CONVENER-ADVOCATE (or partner with existing networks).**

Specific recommendations for Global North bilateral donors and philanthropic funders

In response to shifts in the funding landscape, many flexible funders absorb risk on behalf of their upstream donors through accompaniment and adapting various processes and reporting for grantees. It also requires flexible funders to bear the burden of advocating upwards to get buy-in on their flexible approach and for some of their donors to remain responsive. As CIVICUS explains:

> **"It also took a lot of hand-holding and 'donor-sitting' to humanise the relationship, for instance through a lot of trips. The trust we manage to build as people and humanising the process, to trust that in my role together with the project coordinator we are fully invested in making this work. [...] But also that we refuse to just spend the money so we can comply with the timelines and reporting. So [it was about] finding that code so we know what is important to each other, and then holding informal relationship building."**

This, however, requires a balance to be struck between cultivating personal relationships and building a process that is sufficiently systemic. What this further reinforces is that flexibility is not a goal in itself, but a continuous and dynamic process.

As highlighted throughout the research, 'traditional' or mainstream funders – both bilateral government donors and philanthropic actors – play a key role in resourcing many of the flexible funding models presented here. And many flexible funders NEED flexible funding in order to do what they do, without compromising on their ultimate values.

We therefore present the following recommendations specifically for these funders:

1. Rather than reinventing the wheel, fund those who already have flexible mechanisms set up. These actors have the relationships, infrastructure and organisational culture that support flexible funding.
2. Flexibility starts with being open to doing things differently and listening to how your processes affect those who are ultimately intended to benefit from your funding. Be curious and find creative ways to let go of control over conditions and restrictions. Re-evaluate your risk appetite so that you are able to create an enabling environment within your organisation that is supportive of funding flexibly.
3. Engage in mutual accountability processes by participating in initiatives such as the CIVICUS Donor Transformation Challenge,[57] the Funder Report Card,[58] and the Racial Equity Index.[59] Through this, ensure the ethos of flexible funding reaches the most senior levels of your organisation.
4. Advocate and mobilise your peers to collectively embrace flexible funding. Share your experimentation with flexible funding and the good practices drawn from those examples to normalise risk, adaptation and conversations about power within your sphere of influence.

[57] CIVICUS. Donors Transformation Challenge. Available at: https://www.civicus.org/index.php/donor-transformation-challenge
[58] To be published in 2026.
[59] The Racial Equity Index. Available at: https://www.theracialequityindex.org/ [Accessed: 05 December 2025].

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



This report was co-authored by Rachel Sittoni and Alex Martins, independent researchers commissioned by Peace Direct, and published in 2026.

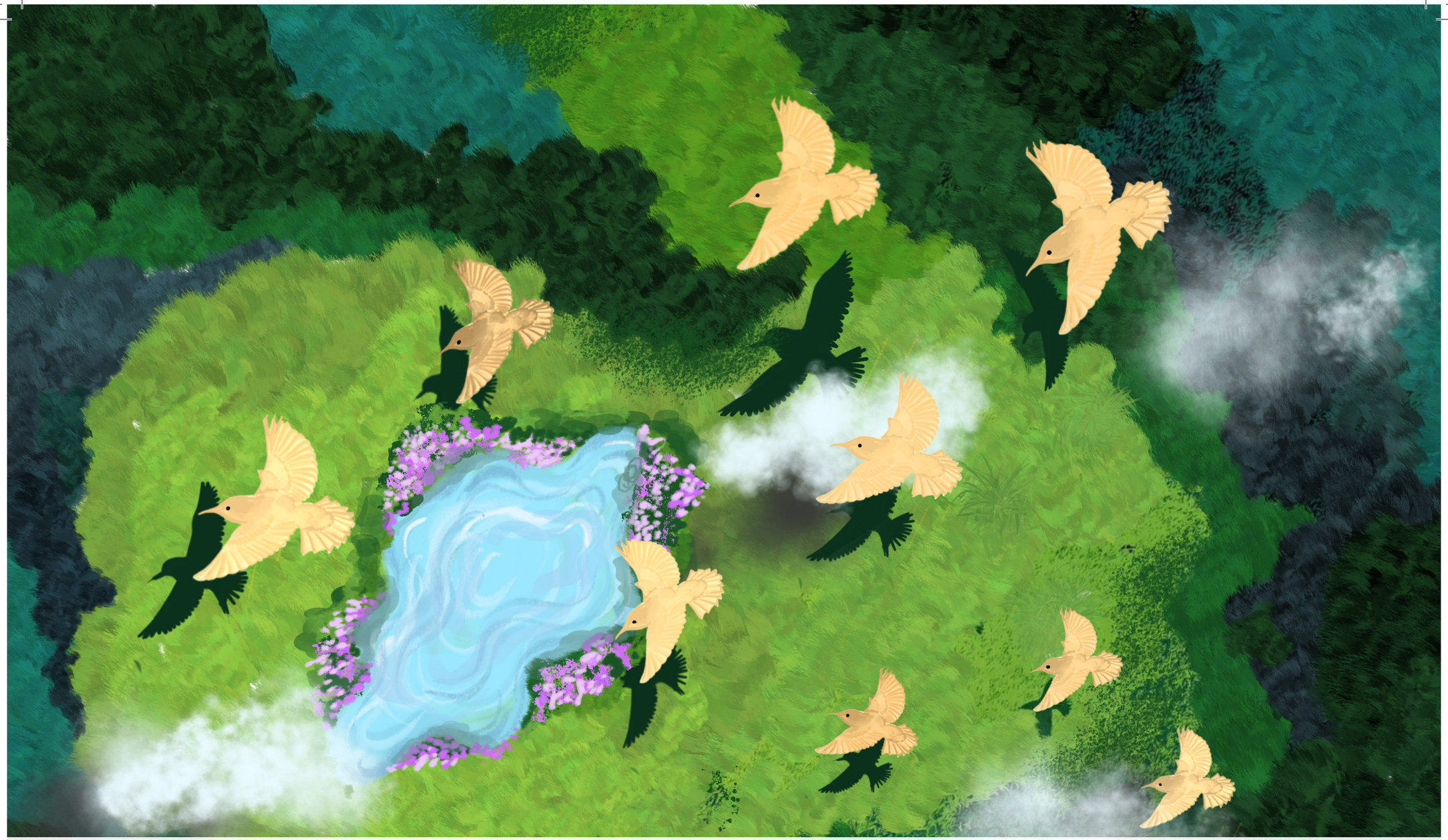
We are deeply grateful to the following people for providing us with their insights and wisdom:

- Rachel Smith (GlobalGiving)
- Seema Kapoor (NEAR, formerly GlobalGiving)
- Harriet Knox Brown (Peace Direct)
- Charlotte Divin (Peace Direct)
- Maaz Salih Idres (Peace Direct)
- Greg Hilditch (Global Greengrants Fund UK)
- Idrees Nour (Adeela)
- Mariyum Areeb Amjad (HIVE Pakistan)
- Francesca Alice (CIVICUS)
- Cathryn Archibald (CIVICUS)
- Mawethu Nkosana (CIVICUS)
- Reylynne Dela Paz (CIVICUS)
- Tais Siqueira (CIVICUS)
- Carolina Vega (CIVICUS)
- Jenny Hodgson (Global Fund for Community Foundations)
- Eshban Kwesiga (Global Fund for Community Foundations)
- Anita Kattakuzhy (NEAR)
- Vanessa Herringshaw (ADD International)
- Inez Hackenberg (ADD International)
- Nana Zulu (African Women's Development Fund [AWDF])
- Anisha Chugh (Women's Fund Asia)
- Gabriela Toledo (Fondo Semillas)
- Yo Winder (Oxfam)
- Ashley Green-Thompson (ACT Ubumbano)
- Oleksandra Brashovetska (FRIDA The Young Feminist Fund)
- Chantelle de Nobrega (Mama Cash)
- Saartje Baes (Mama Cash)
- Gugo Siqueira (Rede Comuá)
- Chhavi Doonga (Prospera)
- Amany Alhadka (Prospera)
- Kaltumi Abdulazeez (LEGASI)
- Ahaisibwe Geofrey Mwaka (Rural Smiles Foundation)
- Jasmine Kato-Naughton (Peace Direct)
- Vidushi Yadav, Medhavini Yadav and Sachi Singh (Designers, Studio We are Stories)
- Arabic, French, Spanish translations by NaTakallam

We would also like to thank the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of the Netherlands for their financial support.

This research was commissioned and guided by a panel of organisations:

- ADD International
- CIVICUS
- Global Fund for Community Foundations
- GlobalGiving Foundation
- NEAR
- Peace Direct
- The Share Trust


ADD
International
CIVICUS
GF
CF
GlobalGiving
PEACE
DIRECT
the
sharetrust